

Summer 7-25-2018

“LIFE IS VERY HARD HERE”: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS IN EL NORTE AND ENRIQUE’S JOURNEY

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**“LIFE IS VERY HARD HERE”:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS IN *EL NORTE*
AND *ENRIQUE’S JOURNEY***

A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty

By
Gayle Anderson

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in American Studies

Kennesaw State University
July 2018

Table of Contents

Literature Review	3
Transnational Communities	3
Migrants from the U.S.'s Southern Neighbors	10
Proposal	26
Thesis.....	27
Fleeing Lands in Chaos—Guatemala and Honduras	30
The Journey Northward	41
Challenges and Reality in el Norte	51
Conclusion	67
Acknowledgements	72
Bibliography	73

Literature Review

With the third decade of the twenty-first century quickly approaching, the multilayered subject of migrants from Central America remains a significant topic of conversation. Dedicated scholars of immigration provide compelling researched information for which to view and understand the various components surrounding the migration of peoples from this region. Highlighted research by scholars' point to circumstances affecting migrants in both sending (home place) and receiving (destination) communities. Central American immigrants from neighboring southern nation-states, particularly indigenous migrants, are a focus for scholars when determining practices that preserve cultural identity in diaspora communities in the United States. When these people migrate, cultural identity comes in conflict with indigenous migrants' efforts to survive. When migrating to new destinations, migrants find themselves participating in two communities making them members of transnational communities.

Transnational Communities

When considering works by immigration scholars, an approach of peeling away the outer layer of Latino/a immigration studies lends itself to illuminating nuances found in the additional layers of this complicated topic. Many scholars apply the term "transnationalism," or "transnational," when describing the movements and relocations of people between communities. Pushing the idea forward, authors Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc in *Nations Unbound* describe transnationalism as "a process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement . . . [stress] social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders."¹

While Basch et al. assert that transnational migrants maintain ties with their home countries and

¹ Linda Basch, et al. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Australia: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1994): 7.

send significant amounts of money to support communities of origin, the eventual disappearance of nation-state borders remains contested. Conversely, scholars have written about migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States under the umbrella of transnationalism within national borders.

Authors Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald in “Transnationalism in Question” contend that transnationalism is not a celebratory factor, so should not be viewed as a one-size-fits-all theory. The authors argue that immigrants’ assimilation into receiving nation-states runs into obstacles stating, “assimilation is also the making of difference between national peoples . . . the sociology of assimilation necessarily obscures coercive efforts to build a nation-state society by excluding outsiders.”² Through an absolute transnationalism lens, erasing national borders may seem like breaking with the past, as Basch et al. suggest. However, Waldinger and Fitzgerald posit borders may be blurred, but dissolving borders is not going to happen. While borders remain, communities between nation-states remain connected through social networks; moreover, the authors claim there are various avenues to expand on transnationalism. They use theorist Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities,” a theory stressing socially constructed communities, and contend that immigrant social networks create multiple imagined communities, thereby expanding the idea of a transnational community.³ Regardless of theoretical aspects of transnationalism, upholding ties across borders lends itself to shared constraints and stresses shouldered by migrants; as an example, migrants develop an emotional cost of multiple identities when leaving their home communities.

Anthropologist Roger Rouse draws on ethnographic research in Aguililla and Redwood, California, located in Michoacán, Mexico, to suggest transnational migrants characteristically

² Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald, “Transnationalism in Question.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 109, no. 5, (2004): 1179. EBSCOhost.

³ Ibid., 1178.

acquire multiple ethnic identities in communities of settlement. Recounting the words of a Mexican migrant in Los Angeles, Rouse cites, "I am Mexican but I am also Chicano and Latin American."⁴ Furthermore, Rouse suggests that nation-state borders will increasingly widen with the inclusion of numerous imagined communities because "transnationally organized circuits of capital, labor, and communications [will] intersect . . . with local ways of life."⁵ In short, the author views transnational social networks respond to political policies and labor issues and that the 'imagined community' becomes more culturally diverse as national economies and cultures intersect in the U.S. The concept of a culturally diverse imagined community in the U.S. underlines multiple ethnic identities for Mexican/Central American immigrants who wish to preserve their ethnic uniqueness while adopting the local culture of the sending community. Like Waldinger and Fitzgerald, Rouse speaks to the reality and rise of imagined communities on both sides of borders. He illustrates the maintenance of present-day connections saying, "Aguilillans find that their most important kin and friends are as likely to be living hundreds or thousands of miles away as immediately around them . . . they are often able to maintain these spatially extended relationships as actively and effectively as the ties that link them to their neighbors."⁶ Referencing Aguililla, Rouse notes substantial transformations in sending landscapes because of the community ties that migrants maintain.

Scholars Luis Guarnizo and Michael Smith suggest that the field is not equal in all transnational communities, a model based on migrant interactions across international borders, but depends on the dynamics of the place and time for maintaining home community ties. Moreover, motivations of many actors from above stem from positions of power and economic viewpoints that affect the social spaces of actors from below. Actors from above include the

⁴ Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora* 1, (1991): 8.

⁵ Rouse, "Mexican Migration," 16-17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

World Bank, International Monetary Fund, nation-state politicians, and capitalists intending to structure “neoliberal” markets “to regulate transnational flows of capital trade, people, and culture.”⁷ Actors from below include people seeking new economic and physical securities by leaving their communities of origin to relocate in new destinations, either permanently or temporarily. The authors argue that sending nations ensure a source of revenue by granting dual citizenship to its migrating peoples, of whom many send back remittances in the form of money and merchandise to their communities of origin. Guarnizo and Smith are in agreement with Basch et al. that sending countries may lose people, but they do not necessarily lose migrants’ societal obligations and economic participation, which takes the form of remittances.

Remittances fulfill social obligations in homelands as migrants adapt to U.S. social structures. Suggesting the home community’s transformation resulted from migrants’ remittances when working in the U.S., Rouse lists positions in “the service sector . . . [such as] proletarian servants in the paragon of “postindustrial” society.”⁸ Hence, his observations not only underscore wage-labor employments of migrants but also the growing transformations of sending communities and Mexico’s dependence on the remittances of migrants working in the United States. Moreover, in the context of claims pertaining to postmodern transnationalism, Rouse describes this position in a lighter view than Waldinger and Fitzgerald who state assimilation across borders is not a smooth process. His arguments also correspond with views by Guarnizo and Smith that transnational playing fields are unequal; yet, migrants maintain useful ties between communities to adjust to new economies.

When migrating to a nation-state based on a capitalist economy, migrants transition from agrarian workers to low-wage laborers. Expanding on his research in Aguililla, Mexico, and

⁷ Luis E. Guarnizo and Michael P. Smith, “The Locations of Transnationalism,” in *Transnationalism from Below*, eds. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004): 3, 7.

⁸ Rouse, “Mexican Migration,” 12.

Redwood City, Rouse focuses on migrant transitional challenges in “Making Sense of Settlement: Class Transformation, Cultural Struggle, and Transnationalism and Mexican Migrants in the United States.” His argument here centers on the idea that migrant understandings of settlement should be viewed not only with consideration of their struggles with cultural change but also with respect to class transformations within the transnational framework of their organization.⁹ He argues that consideration should be given to the environment from which migrants previously lived and an understanding of how their cultural influences impact migrants’ daily lives. When highlighting migrants’ hard-working ethos widely exemplified in U.S. receiving communities, Rouse reveals transformations migrants experience when adjusting to proletarian wage earners in contrast to their previous livelihoods as independent agrarian workers. Laborers must work their leisure time around the schedule of capitalist demands. Interestingly, Rouse borrows Michel Foucault’s construction of panopticism, which allows that a central position of surveillance to provide an optimal viewpoint from which discipline and control may be administered to conform individuals in various systems. Migrants move into a system of neoliberal surveillance when seeking survival by moving out of oppressive structures.

Rouse asserts, “we should treat proletarianization as an integral part of broader processes involving the disciplinary production of class-specific subjects.”¹⁰ Reminding academics that logically people seek survival, he cautions against assuming that discipline naturally follows powerful controls and suggests that subservient people always rebel against them. Hence, Rouse argues that due to the economic transition in Mexico from an agrarian to an industrial-focused economy, people began to flow out of the country to the United States. Additionally, demands

⁹ Roger Rouse, “Making Sense of Settlement: Class Transformation, Cultural Struggle, and Transnationalism among Mexican Migrants in the United States,” *New York Academy of Sciences* 645 (1992): 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31, 47.

for cheap foreign laborers by U.S. neoliberal policies draw migrants.¹¹ Basically, Rouse posits that sending communities become dependent on U.S. dollars and reminds readers that initially, Mexican migrants intended to work temporarily in the U.S. then return home, thus forming a more circular migration process than is evident today. His claim to the reliance of sending communities on U.S. dollars corresponds with the views by previous authors that resettled migrants' remittances significantly support migrant home communities.

As immigrant groups become more prominent in the United States, social networks connect communities not only through remittances but also through ways of communication opening up transnational social fields. Anthropologist Marcia Farr claims that hierarchical order and cultural traits become evident when examining social network communications. Farr describes in her ethnographic research how traditional linguistics reveal the ethos and values of rancheros linking the transnational communities of Michoacán, Mexico, and Chicago, Illinois. While her focus is on rancheros in these two communities, nevertheless, her findings are reflective, more broadly, of other migrants from south of the border. Farr chronicles that rancheros are a deeply familistic culture and highly value ideals of achieving social status by means of their labors and hard work. She acknowledges, however, a separate social status in Michoacán between rancheros and the indigenous populace, who rancheros consider to be on the lowest rung of society.

In particular, Farr describes the hierarchical framework of rancheros as a "patriarchal family structure" reigning over community and claims, "the racial ideology of these rancheros, placing them in the middle of a local status order, with indigenous below them and elite urban

¹¹ Rouse, "Making Sense," 43.

Mexicans above them” and highlights that “rancheros consider Indians to be subordinate.”¹² Farr posits that overall rancheros are individualistic, entrepreneurial, independent, self-determined, productive labor, and assertiveness within their “egalitarian ethos” communities.¹³ Farr also underscores that more women are coming to the forefront of migration and when out from under the patriarchal familial structure, they realize a sense of freedom in new U.S. home places.

As the migration of women becomes more evident, correspondingly, the presence of migrants from Latin American countries becomes more apparent in the U.S. Farr explores the inclusion of transnational migrants stating, “From an imagined community of whiteness that was used to unite various European groups in a new nation against Others, then, the United States is moving toward an imagined community of cultural pluralism . . . toward newer forms of . . . mixtures of what are now considered different ethnic and/or racial groups.”¹⁴ In addition to the physical and emotional challenges migrants face by leaving family and home communities, they also experience the challenges of racism and discrimination based on the social structure in the receiving nation-state when characterized as other. Women participants in transnational communities bear an emotional cost of raising children, who remain in sending communities, while they are in another country. Offering an opportunity to highlight women in the foreground of transnationalism, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila highlight in “I’m Here, but I’m There” the emotional costs at stake for migrating women and separation of families. The scholars identify a concept they call “transnational motherhood”; they created this theory to describe “Latina immigrant women who work and reside in the United States while their children remain in their countries of origin [and] constitute one variation in the organizational

¹² Marcia Farr, *Rancheros in Chicagoacán: Language and Identity in a Transnational Community*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006): 21-27.

¹³ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴ Ibid., 146.

arrangements, meanings, and priorities of motherhood.”¹⁵ Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila relate the emotional and physical ordeals immigrant women face when working in their domestic positions, such as nannies and house cleaners. The authors point out affluent families prefer the hard-working ethos of these women, whose vulnerability may easily be exploited.

Over time, some women while negotiating hardships in a new country become entrepreneurs by starting their own house-cleaning businesses demonstrating leadership and freedom from the patriarchal structures in home communities. Revealed in Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s research are the emotional pulls that transnational mothers experience when obliged to use substitute methods for raising children and surviving under multiple ethnic identities in different localities. The authors’ argument illustrates the suggestion by Waldinger and Fitzgerald that transnationalism needs to be viewed more critically. Research on challenges indigenous migrants face in sending and receiving countries offers additional viewpoints that further stress a more critical transnational focus.

Migrants from the U.S.’s Southern Neighbors

In recent history, indigenous migrants straddled ties in two nation-state communities thereby becoming transnational actors having influence in both communities. In *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, scholars Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado compile a host of case studies offering interpretations on migrant practices that influence communities in Mexico and the United States. Topics range from the effects of neoliberal policies on migrants to cultural and social practices that transform communities and preserve cultural identities. Fox and Rivera-Salgado convey that in both Mexico and the U.S., indigenous people encounter racism on economic, social, and political fronts—economically, placed on the

¹⁵ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila, “‘I’m Here, but I’m There’: The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood,” in *Gender and Society*, 11, no. 5 (1997): 548. EBSCOhost.

bottom rung in labor markets; socially, faced with discrimination as the others; politically, “excluded from full citizenship rights in either country.”¹⁶ Thus, indigenous migrants from Central America have withstood discrimination and racist exploitation on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. The historical reality of dominant societies’ actions toward indigenous peoples, in their homelands and in the U.S., underscores discriminatory and racist control that suppress and severely marginalize indigenous cultural and economic survival efforts. Based on ethnographic research, Castellanos describes the rational of Maya women to survive in U.S. society. Through social networks, the women were reminded of an established Maya “survival strategy intended to reduce racial discrimination” by “not openly claiming indigeneity.”¹⁷ At first, the women masked their indigeness fearing the backward, primitive stigma attached to indigeneity by claiming to be Ladino, “a label applied to non-Indian Guatemalans.”¹⁸ The women felt that by passing themselves off as Ladino and masking their indigenous heritage they would be more acceptable in the U.S.

While discrimination and racism in the U.S. constrain migrant acculturation, this prejudice intensifies efforts at the border to control migrants entering the country. Immigration scholars acknowledge intensified dangers for any migrant attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexican border. As the U.S. increases efforts to prevent undocumented crossings, heightened dangers prevent migrants from easily returning home once they have secured enough funds to supplement livelihoods in their home places. Hence, stays that previously would have been

¹⁶ Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society among Indigenous Migrants,” in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States* (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, 2004): 2, 4.

¹⁷ M. Bianet Castellanos, “Rewriting the Mexican Immigrant Narrative: Situating Indigeneity in Maya Women’s Stories,” in *Latino Studies*, 15 (2017): 19, 20.

¹⁸ James Loucky and Marilyn M. Moors, eds., *Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000): 1, 27-28.

temporary turn into longer settlements for undocumented migrants, thereby impeding customary migratory circuits. However, once finally reaching *el Norte*, a Spanish term for the United States, migrants find themselves exposed to racism and discrimination in society and U.S. labor markets. Sweepingly, in U.S. history the social and political climates have harbored apprehension and resentment toward immigrants. Fox et al. contend that even more so, indigenous migrants in the U.S. face discrimination sufferings because they encounter racism on two fronts. First, the dominant white society categorizes them as unauthorized people; second, Latino/a migrants in the U.S. consider the indigenous the lowest class in their own societies.¹⁹ Overall quite disconcertingly, indigenous migrants, such as the Maya, suffer political, social, and economic exclusion in their native lands and when seeking economic and personal security in the United States.

Anthropologist María Bianet Castellanos in *A Return to Servitude* writes about the exploitation of Maya workers in Cancún that replicates an earlier history of forced peonage service and captures a brief history allowing readers to see Maya diaspora and servitude:

During and after the conquest, migration became a survival strategy for Maya peoples. Although many Maya lived and worked on . . . plantations, many also remained clustered in small units . . . To escape government control, they fled to the forest. . . [Maya communal lands today] were encroached on by private developers . . . As they lost access to virgin and communal lands, subsistence farmers were forced to enter into peonage with these commercial enterprises.²⁰

This history of forced peonage service goes back farther still. Beginning with the invasion by Spanish conquistadors in Central America and Mexico, conquerors maintained control over indigenous peoples and relegated them to the lowest level of humanity. Characterized as an uncivilized, backward, and ignorant people, indigenous communities not enslaved were uprooted

¹⁹ Fox et al., "Building Civil Society," in *Indigenous*, 4.

²⁰ María Bianet Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude: Maya Migration and the Tourist Trade in Cancún* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010): 20-21.

from their native lands to subsist on less inhabitable terrains. Conquerors branded the indigenous as other not only because of their physical characteristics of darker-skin and shorter-stature but also because of their unfamiliar cultural traditions and languages. Hence, characterized as inferior, the indigenous found they were excluded socially, economically, and politically in their homelands. According to the renowned scholars on Maya culture, James Loucky and Marilyn Moors, the Spanish employed European feudal land patterns when conquering the Maya in the sixteenth century. Loucky and Moors claim that because of imperialist suppression, “the major role of the Guatemalan military forces has been to secure the Maya labor force needed for the plantations, to reinforce . . . control over the Maya and to suppress . . . any rebellion.”²¹ These scholars provide an imperialistic root demonstrating how the indigenous have been subjected to discrimination and racism even in their homelands. In either their native lands or the U.S., the indigenous are viewed by the dominant society as unwanted, unworthy peoples. However, U.S. labor market demands for foreign workers extends to recruiting indigenous groups from Latin America.

Indigenous migrants cross the border seeking economic and political survival by filling U.S. labor gaps. In *Transborder Lives*, anthropologist Lynn Stephen details adaptation experiences of two indigenous cultures, the Zapotec and Mixtec, from communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. Stephen offers insight into motivations for the widespread migration from these indigenous communities. She contends indigenous peoples have always found migration necessary for survival and “most people view this everyday decision as one path toward economic well-being.”²² The scholar argues that when seeking prospects in the U.S., the shift

²¹ James Loucky and Marilyn M. Moors, eds. *The Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000): 1.

²² Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 121.

from independent workers to proletariat laborers requires an adjustment to U.S. work environment demands.

Providing an example of U.S. market needs for foreign workers, Stephen underscores the food industry's dependence on foreign labor, which ultimately buttresses national survival. She argues, "Our food security depends in significant measure on the labor of Mexican immigrant workers while our national security policies appear to discourage further immigration and to step up surveillance of those already here."²³ Indigenous migrants, according to Stephen, feel a sense of unease and otherness from societal surveillance not only in their work environments but also in their leisure hours. Like Rouse, Stephen uses Foucault's panopticism theory and contends the concept applies to managing migrants. When speaking of the otherness that migrants feel and their awareness of existing on the periphery in U.S. society, she again references Foucault. Foucault reasons that dominant societies view newcomers as those, "who should belong elsewhere, in some other place of residence."²⁴ In addition to surveillance, indigenous migrants contend with other challenges when relocating. Though Stephen concentrates on the migration of the Zapotec and Mixtec indigenous groups to the U.S., she offers up a layer in transnationalism to focus more closely on experiences of other indigenous migrants, such as the indigenous Maya.

Castellanos, for example, discloses traditional cultural expectations of Mayan women in Yucatan, Mexico. She asserts, "Maya women are considered to be the 'guardians of tradition,' and thus there is a serious investment in keeping daughters and wives in rural villages."²⁵ Revered for their positions as guardians of the culture, women find it hard to leave their villages; however, imposed neoliberal policies as well as natural disasters have imploded traditional

²³ Stephen, *Transborder Lives*, 176.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁵ María Bianet Castellanos, "I Am Guadalupe," in *Comparative Indigeneities of the Américas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach*, eds. María Bianet Castellanos, Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera, and Arturo J Aldama, 113-124 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012): 118.

lifestyles to the degree that both men and women are driven to migrate, seeking subsistence work. Like Rouse, Castellanos contrasts migrants' agrarian lifestyles to new lifestyles as wage-workers. Many Maya migrants face and contend with social adjustments in urban areas. Castellanos notes they "shed previous understandings of time and space and social relations . . . They learned to adhere to a time clock . . . and adapted to the . . . solitude that results from working long shifts and living far from one's relatives."²⁶ Mayans uphold deep-seated roots of independence and adaptability when facing these challenges.

In addition, Castellanos asserts that the family unit is central to the Maya social order and includes extended-kin networks.²⁷ In agreement with previously discussed scholars, she contends that remittances sent by family members who leave for wage labors are a vital means to sustain families and home communities. Regardless of where family members live, their obligations to the family remain intact and sending remittances fulfil those obligations as well as solidify social networks.²⁸ Immigration scholars Susanne Jonas and Néstor Rodríguez in *Guatemala-U.S. Migration* pinpoint the influence of remittances on sending nation-states saying that the Guatemala government upheld migrant rights because they recognized that "remittances from Guatemalans in the United States had become an essential pillar of the economy."²⁹ Additionally, these scholars assert Maya migrants are quick to utilize modern technology for strengthening transnational community ties.³⁰ Jonas and Rodríguez claim Guatemala Maya utilize modern technology to ease into resettlement communities.

Similar to other indigenous migrants, the Maya from Guatemala experience the greatest contrast among Latin American newcomers between their communities of origin and the

²⁶ Castellanos, "I Am Guadalupe," 116.

²⁷ Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude*, 123.

²⁸ Ibid., 119-126.

²⁹ Susanne Jonas and Néstor Rodríguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration: Transforming Regions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): 101.

³⁰ Jonas and Rodríguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 148.

places they settle in the United States. Emigrating from social environments that are still . . . steeped in traditional customs and social practices, many Maya. . . have incorporated with relative ease into the modern and technologically advanced urban environments.³¹

Social networks enhanced by modern-day technology provide sending and receiving communities' streamlined links to keep in touch with one another. Technologies such as cell phones, the Internet, and email now allow migrating actors opportunities to maintain ties with their communities of origin.³² These technologies across borders grant migrants a sense of community with their homeland. Therefore, regular contact with home places allows indigenous migrants in new destinations to bridge the gap with their native lands and to sustain cultural identities and ethnic characteristics.

The Maya characteristically exhibit a strong sense of autonomy and adaptability, contend scholars Byrt Weber and Ana Rosa Duarte Duarte, while providing background on the root of these characteristics. The authors assert that the Maya revere their lands—forests, caves, *montañas* (mountains)—and embrace a relationship with nature. Weber and Duarte stress that neoliberal urban developers have exploited native Maya lands in Yucatan, thereby displacing the Maya.³³ Castellanos et al. highlight indigenous traditions, beliefs, and struggles in neoliberal economies and support arguments by immigration scholars Stephen, Farr, and Rouse. These theories on challenges indigenous peoples encounter include relationship ties bound by social networks, adjustment to wage-labor policies within intersecting national economies, and importantly, preserving cultural identity. Faced with increasing globalization and intersecting

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Luis E. Guarnizo and Michael P. Smith. "The Locations of Transnationalism," in *Transnationalism from Below*, eds. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith, 3-34. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 18.

³³ Byrt Weber and Ana Rosa Duarte Duarte. "Mayan visions of Autonomy and the Politics of Assimilation," in *Comparative Indigeneities of the Américas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach*, eds. María Bianet Castellanos, Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera, and Arturo J. Aldama. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012): 194, 195.

economies, indigenous peoples struggle to preserve their traditions and end up seeking alternative methods of livelihoods in order to survive.

Moreover, neoliberal structures impede traditional ways of life. Such markets expanding into regions of Mexico have greatly affected Mexico's indigenous populations. Capitalistic expansion displaces natives and restructures their established livelihoods. Castellanos illustrates how the construction of Cancún, as a tourist attraction in the Yucatan peninsula, changed the lives of Mayan inhabitants. In conjunction with Stephen, Castellanos posits neoliberal-economic policies, especially the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), are responsible for agrarian workers' downward mobility in Mexico. She argues the chief factors that spur Maya to seek wage-earning jobs are "the demands of a free market system that undercuts local prices by flooding Mexico with cheap imported produce; declining government subsidies; and the Campesinos' lack of collateral with which to secure loans."³⁴ Historically, she explains, Maya migration "has served as a long-term strategy for survival" and "as a way to gain access to wages."³⁵ However, indigenous peoples incur social and political challenges when migrating.

Migrants withstand societal challenges when seeking a better life as they fulfill U.S. labor-market demands. While Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila hint at emotional costs by the separation of families when women migrate and contend that affluent families may exploit vulnerable domestic workers, they recognize women clearly participate in transnationalism. Like these scholars, Stephen also proposes there is a gendering in migration. She states there is a need for "reproductive labor services," positions of domestic workers such as nannies and house cleaners, and claims these services are "the labor needed to sustain the production labor force."³⁶ Along with prominent immigration scholars, Stephen contends the forces of the neoliberal

³⁴ Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude*, 41.

³⁵ Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude*, 13.

³⁶ Stephen, *Transborder Lives*, 140, 141.

paradigm in countries regulates the flow of people across transnational borders. Additionally, she asserts the structure of NAFTA lowers worker wages and reduces social services. Coupled with the demands of the U.S. labor market, neoliberal structure has been a catalyst that propels people to migrate to the United States because small farmers simply cannot compete with large agribusinesses.³⁷ As a result of NAFTA, economic globalization bolstered the flow of migrants, underscoring neoliberal policies drive migrants out of rural areas in order to seek livelihoods in urban markets away from their native cultures. Thus, migrants face hurdles to preserve their cultural identities in foreign settings.

A sampling of the case studies by Fox et al. reveals indigenous efforts to preserve cultural identity and external factors affecting them. Efforts to preserve indigenous languages become problematic for migrants within new public spheres when needs arise to manage issues such as seeking medical help, applying for employment, or obtaining legal assistance. In addition, as migrants and their children acculturate, preservation of indigenous languages becomes difficult.

However, organizations hosting migrant interests offer a safe place to express identity. Scholar Liliana Rivera-Sanchez stresses that symbolic recreations in receiving communities supports cultural identity and feelings of belonging. Drawing on Rouse's concept of "transnational migration circuits," she pushes forward Rouse's argument of multiple transnational communities mirroring the concept of imagined communities and stresses the significance of reciprocal influences between communities.³⁸ Notably, recreation of home place environments in receiving communities not only link migrants with their roots but also uphold their cultural identity and give a feeling of belonging in their new settlements.

³⁷ Stephen, *Transborder Lives*, 141. Rouse, "Making Sense," 43.

³⁸ Liliana Rivera-Sanchez, "Expressions of Identity and Belonging: Mexican Immigrants in New York," in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, eds. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, 2004): 443.

Shared customs, beliefs, and traditions factor strongly in indigenous identity. In a collection of case studies, scholars María Castellanos, Lourdes Nájera, and Arturo Aldama juxtapose current experiences of indigenous peoples to show shared backgrounds. Topics include cultural traditions, gender roles, marginalization, political impacts, and myths that attempt to ostracize indigenous peoples. A case study by Sandra Gonzales recounts the marginalization of indigenous migrants. Referencing theorist Edward Said, Gonzales offers a theoretical reason why migrants experience otherness in the U.S. and are marginalized to society's outer edge.³⁹ In his work *Orientalism*, Said outlines a theory he calls "Otherness." He argues dominant societies harbor discriminating views of foreigners and characterizes them as inherently Other because of their different customs. Gonzales agrees migrants are viewed as Others in the U.S. simply because they are different. The argument exposes a myth that prompts on-going challenges indigenous face for acceptance in the U.S. on top of the lack of acceptance they face in their native lands.

In contrast, indigenous sending communities have to contend with outside political policies threatening their cultural identity. Sergio Camacho, a Zapotec community organizer, offers a view on how outside powers affect and threaten indigenous cultures. He states, "Already stooped low under the weight of our burdens, we now must confront the new burdens of modernization, neoliberalism, and globalization that the government has loaded onto the bare and bloody back of the Indian. Foreign capital is plundering our riches . . . With globalization, our riches will be turned over to foreign capital, with no regard for our culture."⁴⁰ Broadly

³⁹ Sandra Gonzales, "Colonial Borders, Native Fences," in *Comparative Indigeneities of the Américas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach*, eds. María Bianet Castellanos, Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera, and Arturo J Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012): 312.

⁴⁰ Sergio Robles Camacho, "Migration and Return in the Sierra Juarez," in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, eds. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, 2004): 481.

categorized as Mexican or Latino by the dominant society, indigenous groups face even greater challenges to maintain cultural identity when transitioning in new home places. For instance, continuing cultural traditions, such as fiestas or religious customs, is difficult among dominant societal practices. Maintaining indigenous identity often times places social stigmas on indigenous peoples.

In addition to coping with social stigmas placed on their culture, indigenous migrants face a variety of complex social and cultural hurdles when adjusting to U.S. social and economic structures. Issues include adjusting to wage labor employment, establishing social networks, dealing with discrimination, maintaining ties with sending communities, and adapting to U.S. policies. Jonas and Rodriguez explore these factors on the interactions with Maya migrants from Guatemala. The scholars juxtapose the lifestyle of Mayans in their home communities with the lifestyles in receiving communities to show the social and economic transformations the migrants face in order to adapt and acculturate.

One major hurdle migrants encounter, for example, is the adjustment from a self-governed agrarian lifestyle to a rigid proletarian way of life. The significance of the adaptation becomes clear when Mayans speak of their new lives in the U.S. A man of Maya culture juxtaposes his life in Guatemala with his life in the U.S. saying, “Here we do not work to live—we live to work.”⁴¹ In short, indigenous migrants find social structures in the U.S. revolve around work. According to the authors, in communities of origin, migrants’ work and leisure activities blend so that the transformation to new controls in their lifestyles becomes a tremendous adjustment for indigenous migrants. The authors give traditional characteristics of the Maya, which not only aid in their adjustment to life in the U.S. but also make the Maya most appealing to employers.

⁴¹ Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 155-156.

Jonas and Rodriguez explain that employers prefer Maya women because of the women's efficiency and adeptness. The authors say, "For many household employers, Mayan women stood out as superior workers . . . employers viewed Mayan women as highly disciplined, reliable, and trustworthy . . . Doubtless, what the employers saw as superior virtues in their Mayan maids was related more to the women's indigenous Mayan background than their Guatemalan nationality."⁴² Like Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, Jonas and Rodriguez say that many Maya domestic workers independently achieve upward mobility, such as establishing house-cleaning companies. Jonas and Rodriguez argue women from Guatemala play "central roles in the social reproduction . . . [in] Guatemala migrant communities in the United States" and key roles in preserving cultural traditions.⁴³ For example, women prepare traditional foods for social gatherings and, older women especially, wear traditional clothing to family functions.⁴⁴ When Although Maya men and women migrants from Guatemala may experience upward social adjustment in the U.S., still, adhering to new structures in work environments presents a laborious change from their home community experiences.

Jonas and Rodriguez cite instances where social networks not only supported Mayan cultural traditions transported to Houston but also facilitated employment opportunities for migrants in communities of origin. Houston companies, impressed with their male Maya employees' hardworking ethos, recruited new workers based on their Maya employees' personal contacts in social organizations locally and in sending communities.⁴⁵ In addition, with a watchful eye on IRCA, an amnesty program making it illegal for the first time to hire undocumented workers, employers preferred undocumented Maya men because of their

⁴² Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 136.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁵ Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 129.

willingness to work for low wages and their display of “a disciplined character, usually showing little resistance to work even in the harshest conditions.”⁴⁶ The high work ethic and willingness to work in positions that many U.S. citizens deem unacceptable make migrants appealing to employers. In addition, indigenous migrants, oppressed for years in their native lands, seek opportunities for survival by migrating.

Jonas and Rodriguez contend that Maya from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have been accustomed to migrating within regions for thousands of years. In recent history, they contend political and economic influences, resulting from civil wars and natural disasters in Central America, forced Maya to migrate northward seeking survival from violence and from economic downturns. The authors suggest a connection between the political upheaval in Guatemala and the economic struggles for survival prompting Maya to migrate to the U.S. They state, “Political survival . . . did not mean economic survival”⁴⁷ Prompted by political and economic plights, Maya from Guatemala undertook northward migration in the last few decades of in the twentieth century.⁴⁸

Focusing on the northward migration from Guatemala, Jonas and Rodriguez explain that specific destination cities influence migration plans. Cities include, for instance, places hosting lenient refugee policies for migrants fleeing political abuse and places offering jobs for migrants seeking economic survival.⁴⁹ The authors describe the U.S.’s positions on asylum for migrants arriving from Central America. They frame their argument using the settlement cities of Houston and San Francisco to illustrate political policies affecting migrants and jobs available within the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁹ Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 4.

neoliberal system. Specially, Jonas and Rodriguez chronicle strict U.S. policies that denied granting asylum to most Maya refugees who were fleeing political turmoil in their native lands.⁵⁰

Because of U.S. military base interests, economic agendas, and anticommunist concerns in Central America, the U.S. government financially backed Central American governments' agendas to fight against leftist organizations. The U.S. position in Central America strategically influenced immigration decisions about migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras. Furthermore, with barbaric, inhumane civil wars occurring in El Salvador from 1979 to 1991 and the longer civil war in Guatemala from 1960 to 1996, the U.S. aided these governments.⁵¹ Conversely, during the late 1970s and 1980s, with people fleeing these two countries seeking safety and economic security, the U.S. government denied asylum to these migrants.⁵² Particularly, the granting of asylum by the Ronald Reagan administration was almost nonexistent, leaving migrants in a state of quandary: either deportation and persecution leading to certain death or remaining undocumented in the U.S. and fearing deportation. At this time, activities emerged by some religious and non-religious organizations in the U.S. to provide sanctuary sites for fleeing migrants. As a way to deter assistance, U.S. officials raided many of these sanctuary organizations.⁵³ Furthermore, the government carried out numerous raids in work places believed to employ undocumented migrants. For instance, scholars Mark Grey and Anne Woodrick tell about a raid occurring in Marshalltown, Iowa, where many indigenous migrants had settled. The city's residents became aware of undocumented workers when in 1996 the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raided the local Swift plant, arresting and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

⁵² Ibid., 74.

⁵³ Ibid., 39, 74.

deporting 148 Latinos.⁵⁴ The threat of raids around the country underscores the fears migrants harbored of being deported back to native lands with little hope of survival.

However, in the early 1990s with the case still looming of *American Baptist Churches vs Thornburgh*, a case about granting individual hearings to Guatemalan and Salvadoran asylum seekers, the George H. W. Bush administration reduced restrictions by enacting the 1990 Immigration Act.⁵⁵ Thus, Congress increased the number of immigrants allowed each year. Also signed into effect was the Temporary Protection Status (TPS), granting safety to migrants who otherwise would be deported to countries where they would suffer persecution when exposed to armed conflict. The government granted TPS to many Salvadorans seeking asylum and later “provided relief for Hondurans and Nicaraguans in 1999,” however, according to Jonas and Rodriguez, the protection was never granted to Guatemalans fleeing political violence.⁵⁶ In 1993 Rigoberta Menchu, Guatemalan author who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, met with the Clinton administration to appeal for TPS on behalf of Guatemalan migrants.⁵⁷ Yet again, Salvadorans received TPS, while Attorney General Janet Reno rejected the appeal by Menchu to grant TPS to Guatemalans.

According to Jonas and Rodriguez, differences between Salvadoran and indigenous Guatemalan cultures affected outcomes on asylum and favored Salvadorans. For instance, Salvadorans spoke one language, Spanish, and the indigenous groups spoke many languages, thus hindering unified organization. Additionally, the civil war in Guatemala lasted much longer than the war in El Salvador. Jonas and Rodriguez argue, “some Guatemalans, especially Maya,

⁵⁴ Mark A. Grey and Anne C. Woodrick, “‘Latinos Have Revitalized Our Community’: Mexican Migration and Anglo Responses in Marshalltown, Iowa,” in *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*, eds. Víctor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005): 142, 147-148.

⁵⁵ Jonas, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 50-51.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

fleeing the army's scorched-earth counterinsurgency campaign of 1981–1983, came to the United States only after spending some years in southern Mexico.”⁵⁸ Although these differences affected Guatemalans' attempts to obtain TPS, even when affected by the same environmental natural disasters, such as earthquakes and the devastating Hurricane Mitch, other Central Americans continued to receive TPS while the U.S. denied the status to Guatemalan migrants.⁵⁹ After earthquakes hit Central America in 2001, Guatemalans were still denied TPS and in 2005, 2010, and 2011 when major disaster struck again.⁶⁰ Not only through environmental disasters but also the savage civil war, migrants from Guatemala faced rejection with their requests for asylum and TPS safety. Guatemalan migrants found little reprieve in the U.S. Under any conditions, whether in the U.S. or native lands, the dominant society especially vanquish indigenous peoples to the sidelines, casting them as unwanted.

Castellanos points out an erasure of indigeneity that falls somewhere between the black-white binary. She stresses the myth of the American melting pot and references a theory by Stuart Hall whereby the beliefs in American exceptionalism by the dominant white class places indigenous migrants in a category of meritocracy, which further encourages racism.⁶¹ Hence, indigenous migrants in the U.S. face discrimination based not only on indigeneity but also on their national identities falling outside of U.S. nation-state.⁶² From their native lands to new destinations in the U.S., indigenous peoples have endured in the shadows of societies.

In recognizing what Stephen and Castellanos have said about transnationalism, indigenous migrants from Mexico and Central America fall under this umbrella because they are progressive when adapting to modern trends in technology. The use of cell phones, the Internet,

⁵⁸ Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 76-77.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁶¹ Castellanos, “Rewriting the Mexican,” 5.

⁶² Ibid., 12.

and emails fosters interaction between family members in both home-place and end-journey communities. Because scholars see an upward movement of indigenous peoples from Mexico and Central America migrating, the use of technology is an important feature for maintaining contact between communities, as indigenous people from Latin America become transnational participants.

Proposal

With a focus on migrants from Central America, highlighting the Maya from Guatemala, my research question asks what repercussions force migrants to leave their homelands and what backlashes do migrants face in the U.S.? I will research texts centering the backlashes Central American migrants face in their native lands and the challenges they encounter when reaching the U.S. Then I will compare migrants' experiences outlined in the book *Enrique's Journey* and the film *El Norte*. From a transnational social lens, this research is relevant to American Studies because it highlights an emerging group, such as the indigenous Mayans from Guatemala whose expression of cultural identity is at risk when placed against whiteness in the United States' societal structure. Aligning with the American Studies master thesis context, my study will contribute to discussions that Central American migrants face cultural alienation in their sending nation-states and continue to face cultural alienation in the U.S. I will apply a historical research method to compare alienation migrants face in their sending countries and in the United States. My research will begin in January 2018 and continue throughout the spring semester to conclude in July 2018. Resources will be accessed through Kennesaw State University library system, digital media, and Amazon visual text library.

Thesis

In the late fall of 2017, I traveled to the state of Oaxaca in Mexico and visited a migrant shelter. The large entrance door to the shelter slammed shut behind me. Located in the southernmost part of Oaxaca, the shelter temporarily houses migrants traveling from Central American countries—mainly Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—and seeking to reach the Mexico-U.S. border to cross into the United States, or *el Norte*. My visit to the shelter stemmed from my interest in migrants from Central America. Known as *Hermanos en el Camino*, or Brothers on the Road, the shelter provides migrants with food, lodging, clean clothes, medical help, minimal recreation facilities, and help applying for legal documentation to travel through Mexico since Central Americans are unauthorized in the country. Without authorization, migrants perilously travel either on foot or on top of freight trains known as “*la Bestia*,” and if apprehended, Mexican authorities deport them back to their home countries

According to a young social volunteer at the shelter, who spoke fluent English, each one of the approximately ninety-nine migrants in the shelter at the time of my visit had suffered some type of assault by bandits or corrupt police officials before arriving. She said assaults included beating, raping, and robbing them of their valuables, from money to backpacks carrying clean clothes, even taking their shoes. Through the volunteer, a woman from Honduras explained the fear forcing her to leave her homeland with her four children. Gang members had threatened to kill the family if her two oldest boys, under the age of fifteen, did not join the gang. Other migrants were leaving economic structures alienating them to poverty-level survival. Many women migrants were fleeing to find work in the U.S. so they may send money back to their families left behind.⁶³ Undoubtedly, the reasons driving migrants to leave their native lands

⁶³ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila, “‘I’m Here, but I’m There’: The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood,” in *Gender and Society*, 11, no. 5 (1997): 548-571. EBSCOhost.

become clearer when understanding the humanity of migration. Two texts provide a revealing lens into economic and political plights facing Central American migrants that drives them to leave. Past imperialists' confiscation of the region's natural resources and subjugation of its native peoples cemented their control of political and economic structures, thus creating a class divide that alienates peasant populations to subsistence living today. Analyzing two works of art, the film *El Norte*, and the book, *Enrique's Journey*, I argue that interventions by the U.S. government and private enterprises in Central American societies have forced people to migrate to the United States for economic and social survival. In addition, I will demonstrate how the challenges the protagonists face in both texts reveal the social and economic alienation of Central American migrants in their homelands and in the U.S.

The film *El Norte*, a fictionalized reality, is a 1983 independent drama directed by Chicano film director Gregory Nava. The film portrays the migration story of two Maya siblings to the United States after fleeing political violence in Guatemala and is divided into three parts. The first part of the story, titled "Arturo Xuncax," depicts the cultural alienation and brutality against the Maya occurring in Guatemala. Arturo Xuncax, father of the teenage main characters, Rosa and Enrique, leads a group of men to protest the confiscation of Maya lands and brutal treatment of the indigenous people working on coffee plantations. Their father leaves the family home one night to meet with fellow organizers; Enrique follows, pleading with him to return home. However, Arturo replies he must go and explains:

The rich come to our village from other parts looking for good land. That's why they want ours. . . For the rich, the peasant is just a pair of arms. . . They treat their animals better than they do us... For many years we've been trying to make the rich understand that poor people have hearts and souls. We are all human, all of us.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *El Norte*, directed by Gregory Nava (1983; New York: Independent Productions/American Playhouse), Film.

Arturo proceeds on, but subsequently, the Guatemalan army massacres him and his compatriots. Soon after, Enrique finds Arturo's head hanging from a tree and flees into the forest for safety. The army kidnaps their mother; however, Rosa escapes while away washing the family's clothes in a nearby river. Later, Enrique finds Rosa and tells her he is going to *el Norte* because if he did not, the army would find and kill him too. Rosa decides to go with Enrique to *el Norte*; she knows the army would take her away as they did their mother. Viewers follow Rosa and Enrique as they begin their journey northward to seek refuge.

While Nava's *El Norte* focuses on political unrest and cultural racism of the Maya as reasons the protagonists leave their homeland, Latina journalist, Sonia Nazario, gives an ethnographical account of economic sufferings people face in Honduras prompting migration to the U.S. and family separations. By tracing another boy named Enrique's steps from his homeland to the U.S., Nazario experiences crossing the border herself to fully grasp migrants' encounters. She bases her book, *Enrique's Journey*, on the experiences of a mother, Lourdes, and her son, Enrique. Lourdes, living with her mother after her husband left her, earns poverty wages and some nights has little to feed Enrique and his sister, Belky. She has heard about abundance in the U.S. where she would be able to earn enough money to provide for her children. Lourdes plans to go to the U.S., return in a couple of years with savings, and meanwhile, send money back for her children's welfare.

Once in the U.S., however, Lourdes finds a much higher cost of living than she expected and only low-paying, erratic work available. Eleven years pass as she manages to send remittances back to her children. In that time, Enrique passes between different family members, encounters gangs, develops a drug habit, and becomes depressed and disillusioned. At sixteen, living in extreme poverty with barely any basic essentials and convinced no one wanted him, he

makes up his mind to find his mother in the U.S. Like Rosa and Enrique in *El Norte*, Enrique is separated from a supportive family structure.

Many migrants find themselves in similar situations. Specific reasons for migrants fleeing to the United States, however, needs further exploration. For example, I will articulate the causes prompting Lourdes to migrate without documentation to the U.S. seeking work to support her children financially. Similarly, I will present issues behind the circumstances leading to persecutions of the indigenous Xuncax family: the execution of Arturo, his wife's arrest, and the fears prompting Enrique and Rosa to flee to the U.S. A key factor in these two texts lies in the economic and political relationship between the U.S. and Central America.

Fleeing Lands in Chaos—Guatemala and Honduras

Economic and political reasons for the displacement of and discrimination against indigenous peoples throughout the Americas started several centuries ago with the conquering of indigenous lands. Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano in *Open Veins of Latin America* takes readers on a thought-provoking journey back to the time when Spanish *conquistadors* and indigenous peoples first encountered each other. Originally published in 1971, Galeano seamlessly revealed exploitations of Latin American resources and its native peoples. The destruction of the Mayan civilizations and their magnificent achievements were first splintered at the hands of the Spanish.

Because of Spain's imperialist ideals, *conquistadors* violently uprooted and treated indigenous peoples as less than human. Thus, the Spanish invaders viewed indigenous people as a backward people who did not deserve the riches and lands on which they lived and proceeded to mount vicious atrocities against the native peoples. Spanish Franciscan missionary Bartolomé

de las Casas witnessed and protested the genocide of indigenous natives.⁶⁵ Las Casas recounted an episode in which natives brought food and gifts to a Spanish settlement; in return, the Spanish Christians “without the slightest provocation, butchered before my eyes, some three thousand souls—men, women and children, as they sat there in front of us.”⁶⁶ Although Las Casas exaggerated the numbers, his books and public debates highlighting Spanish atrocities against indigenous peoples caused widespread questioning of colonizers’ conduct. In 1542, Spain adopted “New Laws” recognizing “Indians as free and equal subjects of the Spanish Crown”; however, in reality most landowners ignored the law and continued to keep native peoples in servitude for generations.⁶⁷ Over time, other imperialistic countries also found Central America rich in resources and their soils fertile for growing crops like bananas, sugarcane, coffee beans, and cacao. For each resource, the prevailing oppressive country in collaboration with private conglomerates needed something more: people to extract the wealth of the land on *haciendas* or large plantations. Hence, multitudes of impoverished natives innocently became human capital and were contained in servitude to work their own lands so foreign investors could reap the profits.

The profits proved great for other governments and outside private corporations as they kept indigenous peoples in perpetual servitude. Indigenous Maya, for instance, not captured and bound to servitude fled to the inhospitable highlands to eke out daily survival while elite plantation owners viewed the Maya in servitude as an expendable labor. As Arturo said to his son Enrique in *El Norte*, “They treat their animals better than they do us.”⁶⁸ A popular saying in

⁶⁵ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997): 11.

⁶⁶ Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1992): 19, quoted in Galeano, *Open Veins*, 12.

⁶⁷ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 12.

⁶⁸ Nava, *El Norte*.

Guatemala, noted Galeano, is "a man is cheaper than a mule," and adds "The planters have no trucks or carts: they do not need them since it costs less to use the Indians' backs."⁶⁹ Galeano described slavery-like conditions that exploited the labors of indigenous peoples. He wrote, "men, women, and children were bought and sold like mules," housed in concentration camps, and were kept "as long as they lasted . . . In less than three months we buried more than half of them."⁷⁰ Because of the large number of natives exploited as cheap labor, the production of goods remained low for foreign capitalists. Today, scholars say the exploitation of Central Americans for their cheap labor is still happening.

An unforeseen effect of foreign governments' exploitations paved the way for large external corporations to seize lands for private control. Single crop agribusinesses, such as coffee, bananas, or sugar, proved to have pervasive power over communities. As mentioned, *conquistadors* followed by other nation-states and private corporations took the most productive lands for themselves, pushing the Maya into less fertile, semi-barren areas. An indirect result of Mayans forced off their fertile lands affected their diets by reducing the variety of crops they could grow. Hence, the lack of proper nutrition for good health extended to the destabilization of Maya even outside of servitude. All the while, goods and benefits of this farming structure moved in one direction, away from peasants whose work ensured comfortable lifestyles for Central American elites and imperialistic countries. Galeano contended foreign interests continue to profit from cheap indigenous labor in Central America.⁷¹

Nava's depiction of extreme exploitation and discrimination against indigenous Maya coffee workers in *El Norte* correlates with Galeano's writings. In addition to showing the abuse

⁶⁹ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 98.

⁷⁰ John Kenneth Turner, *Barbarous Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969): 219, quoted in Galeano, *Open Veins*, 121.

⁷¹ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 132, 133.

of the Maya, the film reveals plantation owners confiscation of lands for monoculture while displacing indigenous people off their own lands and exploiting them for cheap labor. The visual of Maya workers' hardened, bare feet and tattered shoes when trudging through the coffee plantation with bags of freshly picked coffee on their backs reinforces the concept of forced, impoverished servitude. The focus on laborers' feet depicts a level of disparity and poverty, revealing peasants lacked even basic essentials. A uniformed, armed guard watched to ensure at the end of the work day laborers hauled away bulging bags of coffee on their backs, emphasizing forced servitude and, as Galeano noted, that the backs of Indians were cheaper than mules. Moreover, the guard symbolizes the government's involvement in uprooting the Maya from their ancestral land to benefit others. Not only are indigenous people faced with confiscation of their lands and the exploitation of their labors, they are also faced with discrimination on political, social, and economic fronts.

Galeano noted, "especially in Guatemala—this structure of labor force appropriation is visibly identified with racism: Indians suffer the internal colonialism of whites and *mestizos* [mixed blood people] blessed ideologically by the dominant culture."⁷² Thus, indigenous peoples, such as the Maya, are viewed as the lowest rung on the social structure and as an unnecessary people. In *El Norte*, Nava depicts Guatemalan dominant society's view of the Maya as the lowest form of humanity by juxtaposing absentee landowners' apathy over workers' conditions with the oppressed Xuncax family living under the government's tyrannized control. The scenes showing the Guatemalan army butchering Arturo and his compatriots for daring to speak against the ruling class epitomize the persecution of the Maya. These scenes not only reflect the brutal treatment of marginalized indigenous laborers but also represent the atrocities committed against the Maya in the Guatemalan Civil War. Other scenes point to civil war

⁷² Galeano, *Open Veins*, 106.

atrocities by showing innocent women and children tossed in the back of a truck, hauled away by the army for fates unknown, and Arturo's head hung on a tree limb to hold Mayans in fear.

The Guatemalan Civil War claimed the lives of multitudes of Mayans and mixed-blood Ladino peasants. It devastated Mayan culture, placing peasants in constant fear for their lives. Investigative journalist Juan González in *Harvest of Empire* credits Guatemala as the “home to the longest and bloodiest civil war in Central American history.”⁷³ The cause of the war, ending in 1996, had its beginnings in June of 1954; however, roots of the war trace back even further showing U.S. intervention backing repressive governments.⁷⁴ The wealth of Central American resources, of course, attracted the interest of U.S. businessmen and corporation landowners as the United States entered the world economy as a global superpower by external exploitation of other economies. Central American lands in abundance of minerals, ores, and especially rich soils for growing plentiful foodstuffs were all ripe for appropriating as U.S. economic possessions. An abundance of cheap labor to work in the mines and fields made the region even more appealing to U.S. corporations. In particular, the United Fruit Company became the “symbol for U.S. imperialism.”⁷⁵ By monopolizing the production and sale of bananas, the United Fruit Company became the largest agricultural estate in Central America.⁷⁶

Of major importance, the United Fruit Company needed Central American governments to grant privileges to them so the company could preserve their marketplace monopoly. During World War II, the Guatemalan government of President Jorge Ubico Castaneda, gained favor with the U.S. Under Ubico, the indigenous Maya suffered extreme racial violence. A tyrannical ruler, Ubico decreed Mayas to carry passport identification in their own country. According to

⁷³ González, *Harvest*, 135.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 137, 147.

⁷⁵ González, *Harvest*, 57.

⁷⁶ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 107.

González, every twentieth-century Guatemalan president up to Ubico had intensely protected the interests of the United Fruit Company, but Ubico's protection of United Fruit Company's investments exceeded all others. However, uprising against the Ubico regime in 1944 forced the dictator to resign; and in 1945, Guatemala held its first democratic election, electing Juan Jose Arevalo as president.⁷⁷ Arevalo set about dismantling Ubico's racist policies and establishing a land reform policy whereby large tracts of unused land would be divided among the landless peasants. Following Arevalo's presidency, Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, a proponent of Arevalo's land reform policies, secured the office of president.⁷⁸

When Arbenz's administrators confiscated the United Fruit Company's unused lands to divide among the peasants, the stunned company sought to recover control of the lands by any means possible. After petitioning the U.S. government for involvement, both the United Fruit Company and the U.S. government refused Arbenz's offer to pay the value of the land calculated by the United Fruit Company's own accountants.⁷⁹ The United Fruit Company then utilized the resources of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, CIA director Allen Walsh Dulles, who persuaded President Eisenhower to overthrow Arbenz's government. With the help of the CIA, an armed coup toppled the Guatemalan government.⁸⁰ On June 18, 1954, forces bombed Guatemala City.⁸¹ The U.S. government and CIA backed and trained Carlos Castillo Armas led the coup, which resulted with Castillo becoming Guatemala's new president. To the satisfaction of the United Fruit Company, Castillo overturned Arbenz's land-reform policies, returning land control and favors back to the company, while Washington plied Castillo's

⁷⁷ González, *Harvest*, 135-136.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸⁰ González, *Harvest*, 137.

⁸¹ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 114.

government with full support. The policy reversals came with an extreme cost to Guatemalan Maya peasants relating to land ownership and cultural alienation.

Castillo's policies placed peasants in the same precarious, oppressed environment under which Ubico ruled Guatemala. In fact, a prolonged campaign of terror, still backed by CIA training, held steadfast to keep peasants in fear of speaking out. Plantation owners held laborers in the same bondage, and the Guatemalan government not only backed owners but also gave them the authority to shoot any worker they deemed in compliant. As the scene portrays in *El Norte* where Arturo and the other organizers were brutally massacred, in reality the Guatemalan army hunted people down to kill them if they felt any dissention about the government's oppressive policies and treatment of people. Fear consumed the Maya in their perpetual poverty and servitude, fear of starvation, speaking against authority, and mostly, fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Eduardo Galeano advised readers that the vicious atrocities carried out against the peasants held them in fear.

In *El Norte*, Nava depicts the Guatemalan army brutally gunning down repressed workers striving to have their non-violent voices heard. The visual helps to understand actual war atrocities described by Galeano whereby the army whipped and tortured people, gunned people down, burned them alive, and tossed dead, faceless bodies into ravines.⁸² The army practiced a scorched-earth campaign against villages suspected of harboring dissidents making survival even more difficult for the remaining peasants. Over the course of the war, indigenous groups had nowhere to turn but clandestinely formed rebel groups to fight their oppressors.

⁸² Galeano, *Open Veins*, 114-115.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú writes of atrocities committed by the Guatemalan army against the Maya.⁸³ She tells how the army entered Mayan villages, raped women, vandalized people's huts, shattered cooking utensils and stole animals and foodstuff to starve the people. As Arturo attempted to do, members of Rigoberta's family formed groups of resistance against the Guatemalan government; she also became a target for assassination. Widespread atrocities against Guatemalan Mayans continued with the support of those in power. While the Guatemalan Civil War remained viciously cruel, with genocide of the Maya occurring, the U.S. media did not spotlight the "butchery" according to Galeano.⁸⁴ Much of the U.S. government's decision to back tyrannical policies related to political reasons for economic gains. Elsewhere in Central America, the CIA had been involved with tyrannical governments whereby U.S. corporations maintained high financial stakes, such as coffee and banana plantations; like in Guatemala, those governments committed crimes against humanity.

Similar to their interventions in Guatemala, U.S. policies have had a hand in migrants fleeing from other Central American countries hoping to find political security in the U.S. The film *Romero*, for instance, tells the true story of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated for denouncing the violence inflicted on peasants by the Salvadoran government in 1980.⁸⁵ Here again, the U.S. government supported the Salvadoran regime with the help of the CIA in the background. Acknowledging U.S. involvement in the genocide, Romero in the film stated he sent a letter to the U.S. government asking not to send any more guns, saying the guns were used to kill the Salvadoran people.⁸⁶ González contends, "By the early 1980s, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were all engulfed in wars for which our own government bore much

⁸³ Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, trans. Ann Wright (New York: Verso, 1992).

⁸⁴ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 114.

⁸⁵ *Romero*, directed by John Duigan (1989; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures), Film.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

responsibility.”⁸⁷ Because the United States government supported oppressive Central American regimes, American conglomerates in these countries could maintain control to ensure healthy profits while Mayans and other peasants lived in severe poverty. Hence, peasants began to migrate to the United States away from the atrocities in their homelands. The Mayan protagonists Rosa and Enrique in *El Norte* symbolize indigenous peoples fleeing political turmoil and escaping from cultural persecution. However, Nazario in *Enrique’s Journey* stresses another reason forcing Central Americans to leave their homelands and migrate to the U.S. Lack of economic opportunities to provide poverty-stricken people with daily basic essentials in their native lands also forces them to migrate northward seeking new chances to survive.

In Honduras, Enrique’s mother, Lourdes, could not earn enough money to care for her children. Opportunities for peasants to work are scarce in Honduras and do not pay living wages. Therefore, Lourdes decided to migrate to the U.S. to work and send money back home for her family. *Enrique’s Journey* spotlights peasants mired in poverty with little hope for economic improvement. Nazario also recounts how Hurricane Mitch in 1988 had a devastating effect on Honduran businesses, causing many to go under so that workers like Lourdes had even fewer job opportunities.⁸⁸

While nature precariously influences economies, man deliberately manipulates financial structures. As previously noted, imperial conquests in Central America set in motion indigenous servitude so that natives would provide cheap labor to maximize profits for local elites and foreign investors. The eventual independence gained by Central American countries did not stop forms of imperialism from materializing. U.S. corporations took over the reins of European capitalist imperialism in Central America. When U.S. agribusinesses snatched up large tracks of

⁸⁷ González, *Harvest*, 138.

⁸⁸ Sonia Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey: The Story of a Boy’s Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* (New York: Random House, 2014): 228.

land for single-crop plantations, they pushed aside small farmers. As a result, peasants lost their traditional livelihoods and had to look in cities for other means to support daily subsistence.⁸⁹

González writes, “Millions of peasants, forced off the land by competition from American agribusiness, have fled to the major cities, where enormous shantytowns have sprouted.”⁹⁰ U.S. industrialists, recognizing the resource of cheap labor in Central America, built subsidiary factories producing their products in Central American urban areas. Galeano argued underemployed agrarian workers continued to flock to urban areas for factory work, but the number of workers far exceeded the number of jobs available. Moreover, the abundance of workers, whom he described as “surplus people,” pushed down the “overall level” of wages, keeping wages much lower than in the U.S.⁹¹ In conjunction with the leniencies by Central American governments to entice foreign investors—such as low taxes and low export fees—these free-trade zone markets became most appealing to U.S. investors. Enacted on July 27, 2005, the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), an expansion of NAFTA, includes five Central American countries and has the same devastating effect on their economies as NAFTA has had on Mexico.⁹² Galeano theorized, “The rich countries that preach free trade apply stern protectionist policies against the poor countries: they turn everything they touch—including the underdeveloped countries' own production—into gold for themselves and rubbish for others.”⁹³ While Central American governments may have felt the encouragement of foreign corporations to establish businesses in their countries would lead to greater opportunities for the populace, the concept was filled with false promises. González contends,

⁸⁹ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 248. González, *Harvest*, 219, 251, 252, 255, 256.

⁹⁰ González, *Harvest*, 219.

⁹¹ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 247-249.

⁹² González, *Harvest*, 264.

⁹³ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 101.

Millions of Latin America's young people abandoned the countryside to find work in or near the [free trade] zones. But the cities to which the migrants flowed lacked sufficient infrastructure of road, sewage systems, housing . . . to sustain the sudden surge in population. Giant shantytowns sprang up almost overnight.⁹⁴

Overall living conditions across Central America wrapped people in poverty. González claims, “The vast majority of Central Americans today live in perpetual misery . . . Seven out of ten Hondurans live in desperate poverty, only one rural resident in ten has electricity, and less than two in ten have access to safe drinking water.”⁹⁵ Unable to compete with big U.S. agribusinesses, starving agrarians and peasants sought survival in Honduran cities where the number of people severely outnumbered jobs available. Hence, shantytowns developed on the fringes of cities. Under these economic and social conditions, Lourdes finds herself living in poverty on the outskirts of the city and unable to care for her children in Honduras.

Lourdes barely has enough to feed Enrique and Belky and is never able to buy toys for them. She attempts to earn money for food by washing other people's clothes in a “muddy river” and then going “door to door, selling tortillas, used clothes, and plantains.”⁹⁶ Nazario claims that as long as Central Americans live in the degree of poverty in which Lourdes lived in Honduras, they will continue to risk their lives to journey to the U.S.⁹⁷

Although there is approximately a thirty-year span between the story in *Enrique's Journey* and the story in *El Norte*, both sagas provide an overview of causes leading to mass migrations from Central America to the U.S. The motivations in both accounts stem out of fear: in *El Norte*, fear comes from cultural alienation and racial genocide against Mayans; in *Enrique's Journey*, fear stems from lack of economic means to survive and family separations. Both texts reveal U.S. foreign policies in Central America have driven people to migrate to this

⁹⁴ González, *Harvest*, 251-252.

⁹⁵ González, *Harvest*, 130-131.

⁹⁶ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 4.

⁹⁷ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 294.

country for economic and cultural survival. Nazario maintains U.S. involvement in supporting and installing repressive governments in Central America, not only fueled violent civil wars in Guatemala and Honduras but also prompted poverty leading to mass migration northward.⁹⁸ Indeed, the U.S. utilizes resources and cheap labor in Central America to expand and sustain high standards of living for American people. Geared toward maintaining these goals through U.S. hegemony south of the Mexico-U.S. border, U.S. policies directly affected the increased number of migrants flowing to *el Norte*. The result is more Central Americans, simultaneously struggling against cultural alienation and racism, sought to survive by leaving behind repressive social and economic structures in their homelands. Regardless of deathly challenges on the journey from their homelands, the desperate migrant protagonists in both texts risked extreme dangers to reach *el Norte*.

The Journey Northward

In both texts, the common thread linking migration from Guatemala and Honduras points to U.S. political and private economic intervention in Central America. Enrique in *Enrique's Journey* dealt with cultural alienation, economic hardships, and challenges stemming from family separation. With his mother in *el Norte*, Enrique feels abandoned. Due to oppressive conditions living in extreme poverty, he begins spending time in rough neighborhoods, where gang members congregated, and starts using drugs, including sniffing glue, to escape from his life.⁹⁹ Gang life, albeit a highly destructive structure, gives boys a semblance of family belonging they lack when left behind by parents. The economic structure in Honduras, already filled with unskilled, impoverished peasants, offers Enrique little recourse to improve his situation. However, Enrique believes by finding his mother his life had a chance for stability and decides

⁹⁸ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 285-286.

⁹⁹ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 24.

to find her in the U.S. While Honduras' economic structure and the separation of his family cemented Enrique's decision to migrate, conversely, political violence leading to genocide of the Maya in Guatemala forced Rosa and Enrique to leave. In either case, fear resulting from the political and economic chaos in their native lands drove the protagonists to migrate and face a risky journey.

Nazario argues that most migrants would rather stay in their homelands where they have familiar roots.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, peasants face a choice of migrating to find a better life or enduring severe life chances. As these protagonists represent, many migrants leave with not much more than their courage. Enrique left without having the benefit of a social network offering advice or financial aid. In contrast, the film depicts Rosa and Enrique supported by a social network with Rosa securing a small amount of money from her godmother and Enrique obtaining advice from a Mayan elder, who previously had traveled to the U.S. and could recommend an honest *coyote*. The protagonists in *El Norte*, however, know to leave behind their ethnic identity in order to transition into U.S. society.

A scene in which Rosa prepares to leave offers a visual depiction of the loss of familiar customs indigenous migrants face when transitioning into U.S. social structures. The visual shows Rosa changing her colorful *huipil* for a simple, white dress. The action of packing away her traditional clothing, which identifies her Mayan heritage, symbolizes a loss of cultural identity, including language, established customs as well as traditional dress. Enrique learned he must speak Spanish to replace his native language, identifying him as indigenous Maya, and to escape racism in Mexico. The elder tells Enrique to pepper his language frequently with *chinga*, the equivalent of "fuck" in English, so to pass as *mexicano*. Hence, in their quest to reach the U.S., Rosa and Enrique compromise their cultural identities of traditional dress and language.

¹⁰⁰ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 295.

By shedding cultural indicators, the goal to blend in with other cultures becomes necessary for indigenous migrants. Rosa and Enrique's plan to pass as *mexicano* on their journey attempts to mask their indigenous Mayan markers and foreshadows a continual loss of culture in order to acculturate into dominant societies. As anthropologist María Bianet Castellanos explains, to avoid racial discrimination when seeking to survive, Maya utilize a strategy to conceal signs marking them as Indian.¹⁰¹ The efforts of Rosa and Enrique to leave behind traditional clothing and conceal their native language symbolizes this indigenous survival strategy. However, the film reveals the strategy does not always work because physical markers, like height and skin tone, cannot be concealed. For example, when the protagonists attempt to hide in the back of a truck stopped on the highway in Mexico, the truck driver was not fooled. He recognizes their Central American ethnic culture, regardless of the absence of traditional clothing and the Spanish language imbued with *chinga*. When on the bus to Tijuana, an old man quickly identifies the pair's ethnic culture, swearing at them "Goddamn Indians!"¹⁰² Later, immigration agents in Tijuana seize Enrique and Rosa. Here again, the pair attempt to pass as illiterate Mexican peasants; however, their cultural physical markers caught the eye of a U.S. agent working in Mexico. Eventually, because of Enrique's repeated use of *chinga*, the agents believe Rosa and Enrique are Mexican indigenous peasants and release them. Their attempts to erase their Mayan ethnic identity symbolizes not only racism facing indigenous groups when crossing borders but also attempts by indigenous migrants to claim a *mexicano* national identity. By claiming this national identity, Mayans believe their social status will be elevated by erasing backward stigmas associated with indigenous peoples from Central America.

¹⁰¹ María Bianet Castellanos, "Rewriting the Mexican Immigrant Narrative: Situating Indigeneity in Maya Women's Stories," *Latino Studies*, 15 (2017): 19, 20.

¹⁰² Nava, *El Norte*.

Comparably, in *Enrique's Journey* Nazario tells how Enrique, early in his journey across Mexico, finds that masking his Central American identity increases his chances of integration. In the film, Rosa and Enrique make the journey across Mexico in one attempt; however, in Nazario's book, traveling through Mexico to reach *el Norte* took several attempts for Enrique. The thirty-year timespan between the film and the publication of the book points to tighter immigration controls throughout Mexico and increased dangers along the journey. While Rosa and Enrique masked their ethnic culture to avoid racial discrimination more so for a smoother journey, Nazario suggests Enrique masked his Central American identity to escape life-threatening dangers and stronger immigration controls in Mexico.

The author maintains Central American migrants heading northward “now face a tougher, more treacherous journey than ever before.”¹⁰³ Street gangs, predatory bandits, drug cartel members, and corrupt police officials prey upon Central Americans to rob and brutalize them.¹⁰⁴ At one point on the journey, Nazario tells about a corrupt public official robbing Enrique of everything but his undershorts and beating him until almost unrecognizable and unable to walk.¹⁰⁵ A kind resident of a nearby hamlet helps Enrique and tells him he is lucky; he reveals most Central American migrants came disfigured from attacks or from falling off *la Bestia*, trains called the Beast, and the worst dismembered end up buried in unknown graves.¹⁰⁶ Female migrants encounter a constant threat of rape. Nazario writes, “The rapes are part of the general denigration and humiliation of Central Americans in Mexico, where the migrants are seen as inferior because they come from less developed countries.”¹⁰⁷ In addition to facing racist labels placed on Central American peasants during their long journeys to *el Norte*, migrants constantly

¹⁰³ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 273.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 45, 46, 304.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 45-47.

¹⁰⁷ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 98.

bear the fear of detection by the watchful eyes of immigration agents in Mexico. As Mexican immigration enforcement has intensified, these encounters result in sending migrants back to their homelands where they start over again, as happened with Enrique when attempts to mask his national identity failed. In the latter part of the twentieth century, Mexico greatly intensified enforcement of its southern border, increasing difficulty for Central American migrants to cross.

The most recent plan of stepped up border enforcement occurred with *Programa Frontera Sur*, a 2014 border strategy that aims to increase Mexico's southern border security. Nevertheless, a perception of Mexico's indifference to enforcement of its southern border exists in U.S. mindsets, perpetuated by incorrect information. Claims by President Donald Trump provide an example of misinformation. A report on Mexico's southern border by the International Crisis Group challenges these claims:

Despite U.S. President Donald Trump's tweets to the contrary, Mexico is vigorously policing its southern border, stemming the northward flow of Central Americans escaping poverty and violence. It is deporting thousands and accepting thousands more as refugees . . . Central Americans have long contended with abuse on their way north. Today they run a gauntlet of threats from criminals and corrupt officials.¹⁰⁸

In addition, Eric L. Olson, Senior Advisor to Mexico Institute Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, concurs, "In 2015, Mexico deported more Central Americans than the United States did."¹⁰⁹ Consequently, intensified efforts of Mexico's border enforcement strategies explain why travelling through Mexico has become more difficult for Central Americans between the filming of *El Norte* and the publication of *Enrique's Journey*. By

¹⁰⁸ International Crisis Group, "Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Violence and Migration in the Trump Era," *Crisis Group Latin America Report* N°66 online, May 9, 2018.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/066-mexicos-southern-border.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Eric L. Olson, "Here's What Enforcement At Mexico's Southern Border Is Really Like," interviewed by Jeremy Hobson, *Here & Now*, April 4, 2018, <http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2018/04/04/mexico-border-enforcement-migrants>.

claiming Mexican nationality, Central Americans might travel undetected through Mexico and avoid racist clashes.

On both fronts, in Mexico and in their homelands, indigenous people face racial discrimination. In the film, Nava signifies that the indigenous Maya are considered the lowest rung of the Guatemalan social ladder with the use of racial slurs such as “Indian bastard.” On the other hand, Nazario recounts that in Honduras peasants live marginalized on the peripheries of the racial hierarchy. Through Mexico, Central American migrants face disdain and racism by most people. Nazario claims, “Even Mexicans look down on Central Americans.”¹¹⁰ Prominent immigration scholars agree indigenous migrants suffer racial discrimination even more so. Categorized as racially inferior in their homelands and in Mexico, indigenous peoples find themselves marginalized and excluded on economic, social, and political fronts, based on erroneous depictions as ignorant, uncivilized people with peculiar customs.¹¹¹

Because the indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec in Mexican society occupy comparable social markers to indigenous Central Americans, they recognize the sufferings of discrimination, therefore, show solidarity for other people in similar circumstances. Nazario notes “the Zapotec and Mixtec indigenous cultures” in Oaxaca and Veracruz are credited with initiating acts of compassion to migrants passing on trains by tossing small bundles of food to them.¹¹² While these unexpected surprises help brighten an otherwise Dante-type epic for Central American migrants, they do not fully counter the exploitation by guides, known as *coyotes*.

¹¹⁰ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 277, 278.

¹¹¹ María Bianet Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude: Maya Migration and the Tourist Trade in Cancún* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Marcia Farr, *Rancheros in Chicagocán: Language and Identity in a Transnational Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). Susanne Jonas and Néstor Rodríguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration: Transforming Regions*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014). James Loucky and Marilyn M. Moors, eds. *The Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

¹¹² Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 103.

For instance, once Rosa and Enrique arrive in Tijuana, a friendly young man offers to guide them across the border. However, his actual intention of robbing them soon becomes apparent. The scene symbolizes the vulnerability of migrants in Mexico. Eventually, Enrique finds the *coyote* recommended by the elder, and the *coyote* quotes a fee of \$100.00 to see Enrique and Rosa safely across the border. To pay the fee, Rosa sells their mother's silver necklaces, collected as a cultural memory before leaving Guatemala. Rosa's action symbolizes not only the loss of cultural identity but also the cultural price indigenous migrants sacrifice to escape from repressive ethnic racism. Moreover, the film suggests without goods to sell, penniless migrants enter the U.S. already debt-ridden, eager for work to pay off their debts to *coyotes* and secure a better life. In comparison, Lourdes pays a total fee of \$1,700.00 to have a *coyote* bring Enrique to the U.S., an enormous amount for unauthorized migrants earning below-standard wages.¹¹³ The cost of smugglers continues to increase dramatically. A short time later, Enrique pays \$5,000.00 to bring his future wife to the U.S.¹¹⁴ Not only have costs risen to pay smugglers and the journey through Mexico become more violent, but the avenues to smuggle migrants into the U.S. from Mexican border cities also have become more dangerous.

Distinguished immigration scholars argue highly intensified border patrol crackdowns beginning in 1994, such as Operation Gatekeeper and Operation-Hold-the-Line (blockades with high-power floodlights in specific areas aimed at stopping undocumented migrants from entering the U.S.) resulted in new, more dangerous points of crossing.¹¹⁵ They contend lighter patrolled areas, including "remote mountains, high deserts, and raging rivers," not only are exceedingly more treacherous in contrast to former points of entry found in Mexican border cities, but also

¹¹³ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 178, 188.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹¹⁵ Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003): 94-95.

have become appealing to migrants because of the reduced chance of being caught.¹¹⁶ The crossing point in *El Norte* and the crossing point in *Enrique's Journey* exemplify the increased dangers for migrants. The film, released prior to Operation Gatekeeper and Operation-Hold-the-Line, shows Rosa and Enrique crossing the border from Tijuana and illustrates that before these operations, migrants utilized border city points to cross. By the time Nazario writes *Enrique's Journey* several years after the film's release, intensification of border patrols compel migrants today to perilously cross through more dangerous remote areas.

In *El Norte*, the *coyote* takes Rosa and Enrique to an obsolete sewer connecting Tijuana with the U.S. He explains the sewers were safer than crossing through mountains where bandits rob and shoot migrants. However, crawling through the sewers presents a health hazard given by the numerous rats. The film shows a border-patrol helicopter flying constantly overhead with the threat of capture and deportation. The scene symbolizes indigenous migrants' desperation to escape political persecutions in Guatemala and the fears continually following the Maya as they remain in the shadows of humanity. While Rosa and Enrique remain safe from bandits and unseen by the border patrol, in comparison, Enrique in *Enrique's Journey* faces increased dangers crossing and heightened challenges by the border patrol.

In May of 2000, a drug-addicted *coyote* takes Enrique to a tributary off the roaring Rio Grande and at night pulls him in an inner tube across the cold waters.¹¹⁷ Many migrants drown trying to cross the Rio Grande on their own. Enrique attempted to cross by himself before, but shouts blasted from U.S. Border Patrol's bullhorns tell him to go back. He fears being caught and sent back to Honduras again. Fellow migrants staying in the encampment with him tell stories about seeing a bloated dead man floating down the river and how the swift current of the river's

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 94-95.

¹¹⁷ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 179.

whirlpools swept people under, smashing their heads on the rocks.¹¹⁸ Without the help of the experienced smuggler pulling Enrique through safer waters, his chances of crossing the border would have been greatly reduced. Moreover, his means of crossing the border differs significantly in terms of intensified dangers when compared to the method by which the *coyote* in *El Norte* sends Rosa and Enrique. In addition to the more treacherous points of crossing, Central American migrants face escalating dangers reaching the border.

Even extortion at the hands of unscrupulous *coyotes* seems minor when taking into account many migrants do not make it to the border. Drug cartels, such as the Zetas, one of Mexico's and Central America's most notorious crime cartels, kidnap and kill migrants. Nazario writes, in "2010, on a Mexican highway leading to the Texas border, seventy-two migrants, most from Central America, were pulled off a bus and taken to a ranch by the Zetas, who shot and killed the migrants one by one."¹¹⁹ Through the long journey across Mexico and finally reaching sites near the Mexico-U.S. border, Central American migrants face horrendous challenges when leaving their native lands. Out of desperation, they courageously replace their familiar environments and customs with unknown settings.

The director of *El Norte* depicts the area in Tijuana where Rosa and Enrique hold out as a crowded, run-down slum contaminated with vermin. Violence and crime are not represented as an overbearing obstacle in the city as much as the city is overcrowded and dirty. The film juxtaposes Guatemala's natural settings, emphasizing Mayan's closeness to nature and their spirituality, with a crowded Mexican city. Birds, trees, flowers, flowing waters, and fauna in the forest surround Rosa and Enrique's home place. Here, the film contrasts the situation in the Tijuana slum with the protagonists' natural native environment. Scenes depict not only the loss

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 161.

¹¹⁹ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 274.

of traditional reverence for the natural world and Mayan lifestyles associated with nature but also the depths of misery migrants endure to escape persecution in their homelands.

In comparison, Nazario reveals parallel circumstances between Enrique's home in Honduras and the environment he finds himself in near the border. Certainly, both environments were fueled by poverty. After Lourdes left Honduras, Enrique and his paternal grandmother shared a thirty-foot square shack his grandmother built out of wooden slats.¹²⁰ To earn money, the grandmother finds and washes used clothing to sell, beating them on a rock; beside the rock is a community latrine. Because his father is absent most of the time and his grandmother does not earn enough money for food, young Enrique sells tamales on the streets. Lifestyles and shanties like theirs, in and around the city, reflect the poverty of multitudes of Hondurans. Hence, when reaching Nuevo Laredo on the Rio Grande in Mexico, Enrique finds the same misery to which he had become accustomed in Honduras. While staying in an encampment near the border town, he remains vulnerable among the drug addicts, other migrants, criminals, and *coyotes*.¹²¹ One night when asleep, someone steals one of his shoes. Even though at risk, the camp offers Enrique companionship by sharing life stories. Enrique speaks of missing his mother and his determination to find her. The migrants talk about "the poverty they came from; they would rather die than go back."¹²² Though still wary of immigration officers, by surviving the perilous journey across Mexico and arriving at the border gives migrants renewed hope to finally reach the U.S.

Whether from political turmoil or poverty-stricken economic structures, U.S. imperialistic policies in Central America have influenced multitudes of migrants to embark on journeys to the U.S. In *El Norte*, the long-lasting war in Guatemala, with cultural persecutions

¹²⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹²¹ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 139.

¹²² Ibid., 152.

against the Maya, forced Rosa, Enrique, and many other Mayans to flee, sacrificing their cultural identity to seek a better life and survive. In *Enrique's Journey*, severe economic conditions forced Lourdes to migrate to the U.S. seeking opportunities to care for her children. For Enrique, the family separation prompted an overwhelming quest to leave and find his mother. The challenges and fears of the protagonists in *El Norte* and *Enrique's Journey* do not end at the border, however. Their uncertain journeys continue beyond. Whether reaching the U.S. by crawling through a sewer or crossing in an inner tube on a river, one thing remains constant for all the protagonists—the fear of immigration agents and deportation. Reasons for leaving may differ between cultural persecution and perpetual economic hardships, but the fear that drives peasants to make the journey is equally real.

Challenges and Reality in el Norte

Once reaching U.S. soil, many migrants believe their social conditions will change significantly from the cultural alienations in their native lands. Influenced by media outlets, like television and magazines glorifying life in the U.S., migrants from Central America anticipate a less complicated life complete with modern amenities for which they have not been accustomed in their home places. When stepping off the bus in Tijuana, *Coyotes* shout to Rosa and Enrique, “Everything is so beautiful in the North.”¹²³ From these images, migrants envision lives filled with abundance and the elimination of fears and insecurities in their new lives. Once inside the border, unskilled and undocumented migrants take any menial work available to survive. Having left behind unbearable life conditions, laborers eagerly perform work most U.S. societal members consider degrading. The challenges indigenous migrants face in the U.S. are different, yet somewhat similar to the social conditions they left behind, and cultural repercussions come

¹²³ Nava, *El Norte*.

unexpectedly. Moreover, unskilled and unauthorized migrants remain vulnerable in the U.S. because of exposure to unfair social and economic exploitation. The dominant society casts Latin American migrants as culturally inferior, yet U.S. employers desire them as cheap laborers.

“Labor-intensive industries want cheap immigrant labor to bolster their bottom lines,” writes Nazario.¹²⁴ Just as U.S. companies branching out in Central American countries seek cheap laborers there, industries within the U.S. pursue cheap laborers because they save cost by not paying benefits to unauthorized workers. For example, the film reveals the vulnerability of unskilled, undocumented migrants when first arriving in the U.S. A Mexican immigrant named Monty hustles jobs for new migrants for a fee. He sends Rosa to work in a garment factory that employed undocumented workers, where her job is to iron clothes for 30 cents a garment. However, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)—now Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE—agents raid the factory, the employees run, desperately avoiding deportation. Rosa and her coworker Nacha, an experienced undocumented migrant familiar with escaping raids, manage to escape and find work as housecleaners. The raid symbolizes the surveillance and cloud of vulnerability under which undocumented migrants constantly live in the U.S. Additionally, the factory and raid not only represent the exploitation of undocumented migrants for their cheap labor but also workers’ constant fear of deportation.

While Monty finds work for Rosa at the factory, Enrique in the meantime has to find work independently. He eagerly stands among other undocumented men waving their arms in hopes that pickup truck drivers might choose them to work. Employment is always competitive and uncertain among men, who will probably work in agricultural fields or on construction sites. As the last man standing, fortunately a supervisor of an exclusive restaurant gives Enrique a job as a busboy, paying him cash under-the-table. Payment by cash-under-the-table further benefits

¹²⁴ Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 292.

employers by reducing government taxes, making undocumented employees even more appealing to employers. Because of Enrique's high work ethic, the supervisor later promotes him to assistant waiter. Monty also gauges Enrique as an efficient, quick learner and endorses him as a competent worker to a manager of a large Chicago manufacturing company seeking an undocumented laborer. According to several immigration scholars, U.S. employers find undocumented indigenous migrants to exhibit a diligent, hard-working ethos and eagerly want to hire them.¹²⁵ Still, despite their desirable work traits, will to perform difficult jobs for low wages, and appeal to employers, migrants remain vulnerable and face racism.

Interestingly, with Enrique's promotion, writer-director Gregory Nava subtly reveals prejudices among Latinos against indigenous migrants in the U.S. A scene shows a jealous Mexican-American coworker calling INS about Enrique's undocumented status. The depiction not only again calls attention to undocumented migrants at risk related to raids but also supports arguments by notable immigration scholars that discrimination against indigenous peoples follows them to the U.S. Thus, claims regarding the rampant racism against indigenous peoples within Latin American social hierarchies are recalled while also revealing the racism suggesting indigenous peoples as lesser human beings underserving of advancement.¹²⁶ Enrique and a fellow undocumented migrant escape the raid but then find themselves without income, making Enrique keenly aware of his helplessness and the economic cost of being undocumented. The episode represents the economic insecurity undocumented migrants face in the U.S. More so, Enrique and Rosa find that life in *el Norte* costs considerably more than in Guatemala. As many migrants find, life becomes more complicated than anticipated when faced with the high cost of

¹²⁵ Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 129-131. Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude*, 97. Castellanos, "Rewriting the Mexican Immigrant Narrative," 1-23.

¹²⁶ Farr, *Rancharos*, 21-27. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado "Building Civil Society among Indigenous Migrants," In *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, eds. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UCSD/Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, UCSD, 2004): 1-65.

living and living in fear of deportation. Hence, the depictions of Rosa and Enrique's complicated lives hold true for undocumented indigenous migrants on several levels by symbolizing exploitation and vulnerability of unauthorized workers.

In addition, the examples of the garment factory, the restaurant supervisor, and the Chicago personnel seeking undocumented workers as cheap laborers signify the pull U.S. industries have on Central Americans enticing them to migrate to the U.S. Moreover, while working hard and contributing to the U.S. economy, undocumented migrants must live in the shadows of U.S. society. U.S. citizens would find most jobs performed by undocumented immigrants unattractive, tedious, and difficult to perform, such as work in slaughterhouses, agriculture fields, and heavy construction. In *Enrique's Journey*, Enrique is paid hourly wages as a painter without benefits and with no guarantee of work from day to day. Nazario describes him in "an endless struggle to pay bills," which Enrique relates to "Here, life is a race."¹²⁷ Likewise, Jonas and Rodriguez write that a Maya migrant from Guatemala working in Houston feels, "Here we do not work to live—we live to work."¹²⁸ Lourdes upon her arrival also discovers steady employment difficult to find; however, she takes any strenuous work to pay her bills. At times, she works in a fish factory packing fish all day, in a candy factory, and in homes and offices as a cleaner.¹²⁹ Undocumented migrants accept work with low wages and no benefits because if they complain or try to form a union, they will be fired or, worse yet, turned over to INS. Nazario summarizes views by Lourdes on migrant contributions to the U.S. economy:

To her, immigration labor is the engine that helps drive American economy. Immigrants like her, she says, work hard at jobs no American wants to do, at least not for minimum wage with no health benefits or paid vacation time. Immigrants' willingness to do certain

¹²⁷ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 278.

¹²⁸ Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 155-156.

¹²⁹ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 13, 16.

backbreaking jobs at low wages provides goods and services to all Americans at reasonable prices.¹³⁰

These suggestions underscore U.S. neoliberal constructs, which encompass liberal economic policies in support of free-trade capitalism to increase profits for competitive private enterprises. Furthermore, their views highlight arguments by immigration scholars contending that neoliberal demands for profits, augmented by cheap labor, is what drives migrants to the United States to fill labor gaps.¹³¹ Indeed, neoliberal policies create cultural stigmas for undocumented indigenous peoples in the U.S. by securing them in low-pay, strenuous jobs without benefits, jobs looked down upon by the dominant Anglo-society. However, neoliberal policies requiring cheap labor are only one exploitation of undocumented migrants' desires to come to the U. S. for economic and social survival in response to the pull by U.S. industries to fill labor gaps.

Exploitation of migrants also arises when unscrupulous individuals mark undocumented migrants as easy prey to extort their hard-earned pay. For example, just as Enrique in *El Norte* realized having papers would offer him security by living out in the open in the U.S., Lourdes also realized the advantage of not having to hide on the fringes of U.S. society and of having better economic opportunities. She longs to become a U.S. citizen and to bring Enrique and Belky from Honduras. Lourdes recalls hiring "storefront immigration counselors" who said they could help with proper documents for her to become a citizen; she paid them a total of \$3,850.00 but the counselors never helped.¹³² With the menial jobs Lourdes worked, the money was difficult to save, and she lost hope of becoming documented and bringing her children to the U.S. Because of numerous extortions by individuals on the pretext of aiding migrants like

¹³⁰ Ibid., 285.

¹³¹ Roger Rouse, "Making Sense of Settlement: Class Transformation, Cultural Struggle, and Transnationalism among Mexican Migrants in the United States," *New York Academy of Sciences* 645 (1992):43. Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 141.

¹³² Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 17.

Lourdes, well-intending migrants face challenges to preserve the family unit's cultural value. Thus, financial exploitation reinforces family separations and induces stress and depression on family members in both homeland and destination communities, as young Enrique experienced in Honduras.

Author Nazario describes the cultural impact of family separations caused by migration. She cites Oscar Escalada Hernández, director of a YMCA shelter for immigrant children in Tijuana, with "The effect of immigration has been family disintegration. People are leaving behind the most important value: family unity."¹³³ In *El Norte*, after Enrique lost his job, he decides to take the job in Chicago. Previously, he turned down the work because the employer said, "Can't allow family; it gets too complicated."¹³⁴ The scene depicts neoliberalism breaking up the family unit. On the brink of leaving, he learns Rosa is in the hospital and needs him. He is conflicted about leaving her but chooses to go to her in the end. Rosa tells him, "You're the only family I have. We have to stay together."¹³⁵ However, the scenario pulling Enrique toward working in Chicago symbolizes the power of U.S. neoliberal policies to fracture immigrant families and suggests the desperation of migrants to absorb capitalist values of work and profits over family. As stated by the Maya worker whom Jonas and Rodriguez quoted, in the U.S. people live to work, hence reinforcing neoliberal concepts dictate money and work over spending time with family. Central American migrants come to the U.S. thinking families will remain together. Meanwhile, they work long hours to pay U.S. expenses and send remittances to families back home until they can send for them, which often takes years, if it happens at all.

Many mothers like Lourdes believe they are doing what is best for their children by leaving and sending money back for their care. They become overwrought when not having

¹³³ Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 282.

¹³⁴ Nava, *El Norte*.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

anything to feed their children. According to Nazario, unemployment and poverty-waged jobs affect nearly half of the population in Honduras. She contends people “survive only because someone in the family has gone north and sends back money,” adding “The children of single mothers suffer most.”¹³⁶ However, as scholars Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila argue that Central American families suffer emotional consequences with transnational motherhood, when leaving their children behind regardless of mothers’ selfless intentions.¹³⁷

For instance, when Enrique finally reunites with Lourdes, he begins to blame her for abandoning him and for his depression, rationalizing that his attempt to replace her love led to his use of drugs. As a child, he wanted her love more than anything she sent. From Lourdes’ view, she simply cannot understand why Enrique does not appreciate her sacrifices on behalf of her children. After all, she had journeyed to a country with ways foreign to her and to which the dominant society viewed migrants as outsiders. After a brief interlude of happiness when reunited, Enrique and Lourdes begin arguing extensively resulting in a distant relationship for a long period. Nazario contends that many times mothers need to work extra hours to pay smugglers for their children’s passage and because of their guilty feelings, they become lax with their reunited children. The children out of anger begin to rebel, as Enrique did once he reached Lourdes in the U.S. and then starts using drugs again. Nazario suggests that over time the deep scars can heal.¹³⁸ Eventually, Lourdes and Enrique’s relationship did repair. Conversely, Enrique’s sister Belky decides to stay in Honduras. The remittances Lourdes sends to her daughter have paid for Belky’s education and have helped her to build a house. In addition to the key roles remittances play in household incomes of families in sending communities, prominent

¹³⁶ Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 228.

¹³⁷ Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, “‘I’m Here, but I’m There,’” 548-571.

¹³⁸ Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 279-280.

scholars argue remittances also perform a vital part in the economies of Central American countries.¹³⁹

According to Juan González, “Once the [civil] wars ended, the Central American refugees suddenly turned into the main source of economic aid to their beleaguered countries through the billions of dollars in remittances they sent home each year. Because of that, the immigrants and their home governments resisted their repatriation.”¹⁴⁰ Immigrants in the U.S. like Lourdes, Nazario confirms, send huge amounts back to family members and loved ones left behind, and these amounts bolster the economies of their native lands.¹⁴¹ When Lourdes and Enrique, for example, send money back to Honduras, the expenditures by their loved ones for food, clothing, and better housing helped to bolster the country’s economy. Remittances sent by migrants not only serve to support Central American families and governments but also act as a means of maintaining ties between native home communities and U.S. destination communities through the exchange of communication.

Despite the ties between the transnational communities, renowned immigration scholars agree that migrants in the U.S. feel constrained by persistent surveillance not only to absorb dominant society values but also to conceal their cultural identities.¹⁴² Constantly under the watchful eye of society and government agents, migrants know the consequences of publically owning their culture. After the INS raided the garment factory, from which Rosa and her friend Nacha escape, the two women decide to clean houses together. However, Nacha tells Rosa she has to change her appearance, hence attempting to meet U.S. societal expectations. Although

¹³⁹ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina S. Blanc, *Nations Unbound*. Stephen, *Transborder Lives*, 263, 278. Luis E. Guarnizo and Michael P. Smith, “The Locations of Transnationalism,” 3-12. Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude*, 119-126. Rouse, “Making Sense,” 43. Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 101. Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 282-283.

¹⁴⁰ González, *Harvest*, 186.

¹⁴¹ Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 282-283.

¹⁴² Rouse, “Making Sense,” 27. Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude*, 95-96. Stephen, *Transborder Lives*, 176.

Rosa left her traditional *huipil* in Guatemala, she finds she must abandon any signs of her indigenusness in order to assimilate into the dominant U.S. Anglo-cultural expectations.

When sitting at a diner counter, Nacha clasps Rosa's long, black hair worn in a single braid to one side and says, "Hey, this makes you look Indian. Some new clothes won't hurt." Nacha, as she touches up her makeup, tells Rosa she has to learn English too. Rosa, having noticed two excessively made-up American models in the factory, tests a tube of lipstick on her hand and applies it to her untouched face. Responding to Nacha's advice, the two women shop for Rosa's new clothes to help conceal her ethnic identity. Upon returning home, outfitted in her new Americanized appearance, Rosa finds Enrique worried INS agents had taken her in the raid. Frantically, Enrique tells Rosa he thought he would never see her again:

"I've been crazy with worry, and just look at you," Enrique exclaims.

"And what's wrong?" Rosa asks.

"Nothing, but you look like a clown," Enrique tells her.

"No, I look American," Rosa proudly avows as she looks in the mirror at her new clothes, hairstyle, brightly painted red lips and pink cheeks.¹⁴³

In addition, Rosa and Enrique quickly learn English, thus enhancing their appeal to U.S. employers who seek cheap laborers, while simultaneously forfeiting their cultural language in order to acclimate. Both the scene in the diner with Nacha and the dialogue between Enrique and Rosa symbolize the cultural challenges Central American migrants face in the U.S. Indigenous migrants must forego their cultural identity—their native language, appearance, and spirituality linked to nature—they must not openly express their cultural heritage in order to adhere to U.S. societal pressures. What is more telling, when sitting in the diner with Nacha, Rosa notices there are no *gringos* in the area and remarks the street looks like Mexico City. Nacha explains, "You don't think *gringos* want to live with Mexicans, do you? They have their own nice suburbs."

¹⁴³ Nava, *El Norte*.

Nacha's explanation signifies marginalization of Latin American migrants to the peripheries of U.S. society and racist challenges imposed on them by Anglo-societal standards.

The overall U.S. societal structure parallels the social hierarchy Galeano described in Central America. Especially in Guatemala, from where Rosa and Enrique left in search of acceptance and safety, Galeano noted the structure is "visibly identified with racism: Indians suffer the internal colonialism of whites."¹⁴⁴ Indigenous peoples flee their native lands simply looking for security to live beyond fears of political and economic repercussions. However, as Nava depicts in *El Norte*, indigenous peoples are racially marginalized in Central America and in the U.S., hence dominant societies deny migrants opportunities to preserve their own culture. Undoubtedly, Nacha stresses that Rosa must mask her indigenous appearance, even in U.S. Latino neighborhoods. The cultural alienation against indigenous migrants occupies two fronts in the U.S., thus moving racism against indigenous heritage to a deeper level than in only the dominant U.S. white society. As argued by several scholars, Latin Americans (people living in neighboring countries south of the U.S.), as well as Latino-Americans (people of Latino heritage living in the U.S.), view people of indigenous heritage beneath them.¹⁴⁵

Anthropologist Castellanos contends, "Indigenous peoples, especially from rural areas continue to be racialized as backward or consigned to a historical past; not marking oneself as Indian can be a way to avoid racism, which remains rampant in Mexican society."¹⁴⁶ Therefore, Nacha's advice for Rosa to look less Indian underscores the dual-discrimination that indigenous migrants face in the U.S. Indigenous cultures suffer discrimination and racism wherever they settle. Labeled as inferior by Latinos and U.S. white society, migrants of indigenous heritage

¹⁴⁴ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 106.

¹⁴⁵ Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude*, 119-126. Farr, *Rancheros*, 21-27. Fox and Rivera-Salgado "Building Civil Society," 1-65.

¹⁴⁶ Castellanos, "Rewriting," 1-23.

acknowledge the discrimination against them and find the racism restrictive in living a normal life in the United States. Nazario suggests migrants from Central America feel people look at them as though they are inferior when they go to public places, so they stay inside more often than they did in their homelands.¹⁴⁷

The author discusses the racism that Enrique experiences in the U.S. She writes that Enrique explains when he does not speak English well, people “look at you as if you are a flea,” further clarifying she adds, “Salespeople in stores often attend to Anglo-customers first. Even Mexicans look down on Central Americans.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the complex racist stigma attached to Central American migrants in the U.S. places them in similar cultural alienating positions as in their native lands where they face racism by elites and Ladinos, who are non-indigenous people. Indeed, indigenous migrants keenly feel and acknowledge racist discrimination against them in the U.S.

In *El Norte*, Nava skillfully depicts the wide racial divide between U.S. whites and indigenous migrants. Rosa, noticing from a window in a house she cleans, sees the wealthy-owner’s daughter sitting in the driveway in her black Mercedes. The woman, wearing dark sunglasses, pretentiously slung her blonde hair about. At first, Rosa smiles at the display of U.S. abundance and independence. Quickly she realizes her station in this country where her indigenous roots assign her still to the lowest rung in society’s ladder. With her cultural music playing in the background, Rosa cast her gaze down; her expression changes from joy to sadness. The action signifies Rosa’s awareness of her lower-class status voided of true independence. Unexpectedly, Nava reveals life-or-death obstacles indigenous migrants face in the U.S. based on discrimination against them in public services.

¹⁴⁷ Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 223.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

When Rosa and Enrique crawled through the old sewer pipe to reach the U.S., the masses of rats attacked and bit them repeatedly. As a result, Rosa develops marine typhus and becomes extremely ill. At first, she seeks help from a neighborhood female healer, who attempts to break Rosa's high fever by burning candles and aggressively contorting Rosa's arms and legs. Later, when she and Nacha are cleaning a house, Rosa faints but begs Nacha not to take her to a hospital out of fear the authorities would send her back to Guatemala. Wisely, Nacha ignores Rosa, taking her to the hospital anyway. Rosa, drenched with sweat from the fever, stands with Nacha at a nurse's admission desk. Nacha informs the nurse Rosa is very sick, however, the nurse simply replies, "I will have to refer this to the doctor, and he will decide whether or not to take you."¹⁴⁹ The nurse tells Nacha and Rosa to sit and wait. Weak and unable to sit up, Rosa leans back in the waiting-room seating. When a doctor finally arrives, he diagnoses Rosa with a contagious typhus and admits her to the hospital out of concern for public safety. Another doctor, however, correctly diagnoses Rosa with marine typhus, a non-contagious type of typhus, and treatment for Rosa ceases. In these scenes, Nava symbolizes issues undocumented migrants face when seeking help in the U.S. First, migrants intensely fear authorities and deportation; secondly, migrants experience public humiliation and discrimination based on their status. Moreover, on a political level, Central American migrants encounter cultural alienation and indifference by influential U.S. governmental powers.

The U.S. government, for example, has responded with indifference to the circumstances under which Central Americans sought safety and refuge from cultural persecution. During the brutal civil-war years in Central America, oppressed indigenous peoples able to escape the conflict sought refuge in the United States. The U.S. government, however, aware of the slaughter, even backing and sometimes helping to install repressive governments, systematically

¹⁴⁹ Nava, *El Norte*.

denied indigenous migrants asylum. Scholars contend strict U.S. policies placed the Maya from Guatemala at a disadvantage for granting asylum more so than other migrants from Central American countries.¹⁵⁰ Juan González, offering a description of U.S. immigration actions affecting Central American migrants, writes:

The Immigration and Naturalization Service welcomed the Nicaraguans but intercepted and interned the Guatemalans and Salvadorans. By routinely denying refugee status to the latter two groups, our government condemned Salvadorans and Guatemalans who managed to sneak across the border to a precarious and illegal existence at the margins of Anglo society. They became the preferred gardeners, cooks, and nannies of a vast underground economy that mushroomed in the 1980s to service middle-class America.”¹⁵¹

El Norte offers a visual representation of the fates of indigenous Maya from Guatemala. The film suggests Rosa and Enrique escaped the genocide of their Maya culture only to be cast as cultural outsiders in U.S. society, relegated to positions of service with only a small window into economic security. Likewise, Nazario contends migrant women from regions, such as Lourdes’ homeland in Central America, fill the low pay, servitude positions of nannies, cleaners, and factory workers, positions that require numerous hours away from their families and children.¹⁵²

Additionally, Nazario maintains the separation of children and their mothers, although mothers send money for children’s welfare, comes at emotional costs to family relationships. She also suggests that the long hours migrant mothers spend in U.S. servitude positions affect their children. Children become resentful of mothers’ time away from them, especially children like Enrique who took numerous risks journeying to be with his mother. Having felt abandoned in their home countries, these children feel abandoned again and left to cope in a country where people view them as different and as the Other. Researcher Sandra Gonzales asserts indigenous migrants’ feelings of otherness stems from marginalization. Building on Edward Said’s theory of

¹⁵⁰ Jonas and Rodriquez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 40, 41, 46, 77.

¹⁵¹ González, *Harvest*, 129-130.

¹⁵² Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 280, 286.

otherness, Gonzales agrees U.S. society views migrants as others because they are different.¹⁵³

Juan González explains, “To white Americans, they reinforced prejudices . . . they created the ‘us’ and ‘them’ cultural construct Said revealed as a critical part of imperialist cultural domination.”¹⁵⁴ Feelings of inferiority easily may impair the futures of indigenous migrant children left to their own devices to negotiate in U.S. dominant social structures. On top of facing cultural challenges as children, in *El Norte* Nava paints an even more grim fate for children whose parents the INS captured and deported.

When INS raided the garment factory where Rosa worked, the owner of the garment factory calls Monty who had supplied the undocumented migrant workers. Monty shouts, “Who gives a damn about your business? What am I going to do about all the babies they left here?” and later exclaims, “Babies get picked up and taken to the orphanages.”¹⁵⁵ The film suggests the separation of innocent children from their families by placing them in strange environments with no familiar emotional support. Immigration researchers provide data on the 1996 INS raid on a Swift meatpacking plant in Marshalltown, Iowa, where agents captured and deported 148 migrants of indigenous heritage.¹⁵⁶ Information on children was absent in this article but these ideas connect with what González tells readers:

Between 2002 and 2006, workplace arrests of undocumented immigrants sky rocked by 750 percent, going from 485 to 3,667. They continued climbing, to 4,077 in 2007 and then to 5,184 in 2008. In many of the early raids, hundreds of immigrant parents were summarily dispatched to distant federal detention centers without any chance to call schools or family members to arrange for the care of their children.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Sandra Gonzales, “Colonial Borders, Native Fences,” *Comparative Indigeneities of the Américas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach*, eds. M. Bianet Castellanos, Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera, and Arturo J Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012): 312.

¹⁵⁴ González, *Harvest*, 237.

¹⁵⁵ Nava, *El Norte*.

¹⁵⁶ Mark A. Grey and Anne C. Woodrick, “‘Latinos Have Revitalized Our Community’: Mexican Migration and Anglo Responses in Marshalltown, Iowa,” in *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*, eds. Víctor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005): 142-147.

¹⁵⁷ González, *Harvest*, 211.

Thus, in unforeseen ways, migrant exploitation affects the hopes of all migrant family members.

By comparing the aspirations of the protagonists in *El Norte* and in *Enrique's Journey*, challenges facing Central American migrants throughout their journey from their native lands to the U.S. can be recognized. Rosa and Enrique, for example, sought social acceptance and economic security to live with pride when they journeyed to the U.S. However, the film ends with Rosa dying in a U.S. hospital. Earlier in her feverish delirium, Rosa envisions her mother cooking *tortillas* in the Los Angeles apartment she and Enrique share. Her mother voices, "Life is difficult here. You have to buy food . . . pay rent. It's all so expensive. They said you can make a lot of money in the North, but they never said you had to spend so much."¹⁵⁸ The words of the mother signify failed hopes based on false expectations created by media outlets.

When Rosa lies dying in her hospital bed, she looks back on whether she and Enrique, as indigenous migrants, had secured an independent life. She states, "Life is very hard here, Enrique. We're not really free. . . In our own land, there is no place for us. They want to kill us all. There's no home for us there. In Mexico, there is only poverty. There is no place for us there either. In here in the North, we're not accepted."¹⁵⁹ Hence, in Guatemala, Rosa and Enrique escaped cultural persecution, including servitude and certain death, only to find in *el Norte* their lives were similar, living in fear and servitude with no respect. Enrique acknowledges they work very hard but yields to Anglo-capitalist values, saying they will be rich when they return to their village and people will finally respect them. Rosa dies, leaving Enrique the surviving family member; symbolically he represents the preservation of the Maya culture, albeit challenged by domineering U.S. expectations. At the beginning of the film in Guatemala, their father declares that peasants are just a pair of arms to the rich; thus, in the U.S. Enrique remains in the same

¹⁵⁸ Nava, *El Norte*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

culturally alienated position of cheap labor. When a man driving a pickup truck shouted, “I need men with strong arms,” Enrique raises his arms and shouts back, “Me! Take me—I’ve strong arms!” The film symbolizes cultural alienation following indigenous migrants to the U.S. Consequently, without changes in societal approval of indigenous culture, their hope for economic security and cultural survival did not materialize in the United States.

On the other hand, in *Enrique’s Journey*, Enrique left Honduras seeking to find his mother. He longed for family unity and his mother’s help to cope with his depression, poverty, gang exposure, and drug use. When reunited with Lourdes in the U.S., at first his dream of family unity had come true. In later months, however, anger and tension consumed their relationship, and it seemed Lourdes had lost her son and Enrique had lost his mother. Neither felt truly accepted and comfortable in U.S. public places. Certainly, their material possessions in the U.S. surpassed those in Honduras, but they had to work hard with little free time for family. In the U.S., Nazario writes Enrique and Lourdes face alienation based on their cultural status, just as experienced in Honduras, and denotes that in the U.S. people treat them as inferior.

Whether depicted in the visual text of *El Norte* or in the book *Enrique’s Journey*, Central American migrants are viewed with contempt and face racism in U.S. communities. Though the difference in timeframes of the stories point to two separate reasons forcing the protagonists to migrate (*El Norte* highlighting political upheaval and *Enrique’s Journey* emphasizing economic turmoil), U.S. foreign policies and private corporation intrusions buttressed economic uncertainty in Central America and triggered mass migrations to the United States. Still, even though Central American migrants find cultural repercussions in this country, numerous people leave their familiar homelands and continue to come hoping to find cultural and economic

security in the U.S. However, when yielding to U.S. capitalist economic values, migrants sacrifice family values and their traditional ways of life.

Conclusion

As we have seen, U.S. intervention in Central American countries affected what is happening in those countries today, sending multitudes of people to migrate northward. Today's economic woes in Central America result from foreign capitalists' exploitation of the region's resources and from their repressive governments catering to the interests of outside governments and private conglomerates, like the U.S. and the United Fruit Company. Civil wars resulted in devastation to indigenous peoples. Some indigenous groups escaping slaughter sought safety in distant hinterlands or, like Rosa and Enrique, fled to the U.S. However, civil wars do not solely account for Central Americans migrating to *el Norte*. After the wars, economic situations in Central America were not sustainable. Not only did the exploitation of the natural resources account for the region's economic struggles but also exploitation of its people as cheap laborers for outside capitalists placed peasants in perpetual servitude. As Enrique hoped for in *El Norte* and Lourdes in *Enrique's Journey*, migrants plan to earn enough money to return to their native lands and live out of poverty's clutches. Still, the idea of giving up their traditional ways of life does not enter in most migrants' plans when they set out on the journey to reach the U.S.

Journeying through Mexico each year becomes increasingly dangerous, and as border patrols at the Mexico-U.S. border become more rigorous, migrants attempt crossing at points more perilous than ever before. *Coyotes* charge impoverished peasants outrageous prices to guide them across the border, and the cost does not guarantee people's safety. Nazario tells us:

Immigrants . . . once returned home after brief work stints in the United States. Today, the increasing difficulty and cost of crossing means more command and stay. The new strategy has also resulted in more than three hundred deaths each year [likely more

today], as migrants are forced to cross in areas that are less populated, more isolated, and more geographically hostile.¹⁶⁰

From the two texts, we see Central American migrants are aware of the dangers, and throughout the journey, experience cultural alienation and humiliation. Once in the U.S., migrants find many factors about the country have not been conveyed to them.

Central American migrants experience racist and discriminatory alienation. They find while work is hard, which they are already accustomed in their homelands, but racism places them yet again on the fringes of society. Families become fragmented not only from government raids but also from working long hours as cheap laborers in low-wage positions, which supports the underbelly of neoliberalism. Uprooted from their traditional ways of life, Central American migrants undergo the risk of losing their cultural identity, such as language, traditional clothing, and customs. Once seen by oppressors in their native lands as beasts of burden for cheap labor, the U.S. society views them as “others” who are capable of being cheap laborers. Confusingly, U.S. industries give migrants a green light when they need their labor, but when U.S. society complains about their presence, migrants are given a bright red light. Pressured to live on the outskirts of U.S. society, migrants live in fear of deportation and in constant awareness of living under surveillance. Using modern technology, many migrants console themselves by maintaining ties with their homelands and send remittances back to care for loved ones, significantly benefitting their home places in the process. In addition to sending remittances, other transnational practices, such as the exchange of goods, social styles, ideas, and traits impact both sending and receiving economies.¹⁶¹ Gifts of toys, clothes, and household goods remitted by Lourdes, Enrique, and eventually Lourdes’ sister when she migrated to the U.S., would have influenced how their families and friends distinguished themselves in their homeland. Without

¹⁶⁰ Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 273, 294.

¹⁶¹ Jonas and Rodriguez, *Guatemala-U.S. Migration*, 20.

doubt, Central American migrants like the protagonists in *Enrique's Journey* contribute to U.S. society in ways other than filling gaps of low-paying positions required in capitalist societies.

Central American migrants enrich U.S. society with their art, music, film, culture, and new foodways when they open restaurants and bakeries. Nazario states, "Immigrants' biggest contribution . . . is how their presence brings new blood, new ideas, and new ways of looking at things that drive creativity and spur advances."¹⁶² To my thinking, openly representing their culture is Central American migrants' richest contribution. The celebrated U.S. melting pot, as we have seen, does not truly accept outside cultures; however, the country would be richer in knowledge and expanded values by embracing migrant cultures. González poetically states this concept saying, "our most dangerous enemies are not each other but the great wall of ignorance between us."¹⁶³ However, the cultural alienation migrants face in the U.S. impedes breaking apart that wall. The chance of migrants finding acceptance and decreasing their fears in the U.S. becomes greater with the establishment of organizations to help migrants navigate public services and facilities for an understanding of their human rights. For example, migrants less familiar with English who need legal or medical aid may benefit by such organizations and avoid unnecessary sufferings. A critical outcome of the racism migrants face erupts into tragic scenarios, as Nava depicted when Rosa's fear of authorities caused her first to seek help from a healer, delay hospital aid, consequently leading to her death.

However, Central American migrants finding acceptance and economic security in the United States is not the answer to address their uprooting and sacrifice of cultural identities. An awareness of the role the U.S. holds in the economic and political history in Central America could potentially transition into a knowledgeable U.S. society for humanitarian understanding of

¹⁶² Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 286.

¹⁶³ González, *Harvest*, xxiv.

Central American migrants. Scholars Nazario and González contend migrants from Central America will continue to come to the U.S. regardless of dangers along the journey. Both writers argue the answer to migrants remaining in their homelands, where migrants would prefer to stay anyway, is for economic structures in Central American countries to provide ample job opportunities offering good wages. A Honduran woman explains, “There would have to be jobs. Jobs that pay okay. That’s all.”¹⁶⁴ González maintains U.S. interference in the economies of Central America continues to drive inhabitants immersed in poverty to come to the U.S.:

The more that U.S. corporations, U.S. culture, and the U.S. dollar penetrate into Latin America, the more that laborers from that region will be pulled here, and the more that deteriorating conditions in their own homelands will push the migrants here. This push-and-pull phenomenon creates an irresistible force, and a constant stream of migrants heading north.¹⁶⁵

An awareness that U.S. policies have underwritten economic circumstances, which have rooted people in poverty, sheds light on reasons why Central Americans migrate northward. Cheap labor in Central America helps to line the pockets of U.S. capitalists and keep the cost of goods down for the American population. All the while, the region’s high unemployment and poverty wages continue to send Central Americans to *el Norte*. By having an awareness of the relationship and history between the United States and Central America, U.S. citizens will understand that people entrenched in poverty come seeking simply to survive, not to pursue better opportunities.

Indeed an analysis of the film, *El Norte*, and the book, *Enrique’s Journey*, demonstrates that the hand of U.S. economic and political policies in Central America forces people to migrate northward for economic and social survival. Furthermore, the texts reveal cultural alienation of Central American migrants in their homelands and in the United States. These texts underscore

¹⁶⁴ Nazario, *Enrique’s Journey*, 295.

¹⁶⁵ González, *Harvest*, 224.

political turmoil and perpetual economic hardships migrants face in their homelands. Today, escalating gang violence, killings, and forced recruitment, such as recounted by the woman I met at the migrant shelter, intensify Central Americans' fears. Unquestionably, whether migration stems from cultural persecution, gang violence, or economic survival, the fears driving Central Americans to make the treacherous journey northward are equally real.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the many highly professional people who helped to make my thesis possible. I am grateful to Dr. Rebecca Hill, Director and Coordinator of the Masters of Arts in American Studies Program at Kennesaw State University, for her instruction in scholarship and methods skills.

I would especially like to express my gratitude to my capstone advisors. Many thanks to Dr. Rodolfo Aguilar, Assistant Professor of American Studies and Latin American and Latino Studies, as a major contributor during the assembly of my project, for his wealth of knowledge and leadership in Latin American and Latino studies and his consistent dedication during my entire project. I would also like to thank Dr. Ernesto Silva, Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Spanish, for his creative guidance in film analysis.

Thank you goes to the Kennesaw Writing Center and graduate writing assistants. A special thank you to Kelsey Medlin for her proficient support during the lengthy writing process. Thank you also goes to Jason Faust for his skilled support with Chicago style.

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